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By Aleks Devic 19 March 2019

Breast cancer hope: Regulator green-lights treatment

A NEW breast cancer wonder drug has been approved for use in Australia from today.

Women diagnosed with the aggressive HER2+ breast cancer have a one in four chance of relapse, even after surgery and chemotherapy. But test data has shown the drug, Nerlynx, reduces the five-year risk of death or recurrence in women with earlystage HER2+ by 42 per cent.

The Therapeutic Goods Administration has now approved use of the drug.

Pharmaceutical company Specialised Therapeutics is lobbying the federal government to put the drug, which in North America costs \$200,000 for a full 12-month course of treatment, on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. But for the moment, the drug is available free via an access program. Specialised Therapeutics and the drug's developers, Puma Biotechnology Inc., will absorb the cost.

Nationally, it is predicted that 19,371 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer this year, and it is estimated that 20 per cent of all newly diagnosed women will have HER2+ early breast cancer. Oncologist Professor Arlene Chan, AM, from the Breast Cancer Research Centre Western Australia, said the drug would improve lives and dramatically cut relapse risks. Prof Chan, who was involved in trials of Nerlynx, said: "Those women who are spared an invasive relapse will be eternally grateful that they have received this drug."

Breast Cancer Network Australia chief executive officer Kirsten Pilatti said the

drug provided patients with additional treatment options. “What we do know is the fear of the breast cancer returning is one of (patients’) greatest fears,” Ms Pilatti said. “Any treatment option that can reduce a woman’s risk of recurrence is not just great from a cancer perspective but also from an emotional perspective,” she said. “This is a great first step.”

Women are being urged to consult their oncologist about whether the drug is a suitable treatment for them. And they are being reassured that it will not leave them out of pocket.

Kate Harper, who was diagnosed with the HER2+ breast cancer when her twin boys were aged just six, has begun treatment with Nerlynx. “I have two young children. I have got a lot to live for. I have always said I will do anything and everything I can to give myself a chance and my children a chance,” she said.

Doctors say the most common side effect of the drug is diarrhoea, which data suggests treatment can reduce.