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Australians Will Need to ‘Reconcile Themselves to this New Reality’

STA’s Carlo Montagner says the company’s finance arrangement with Latitude Finance to support patient access to a cancer recurrence diagnostic is unfortunate but that Australians need to “reconcile themselves to this new reality” while government funding remains such a challenge.

Specialised Therapeutics Australia (STA) has announced the arrangement with Latitude Finance under which breast cancer patients can access interest-free payment plans of up to two years to pay for the Oncotype DX genomic test.

The profiling test analyses 21 genes in a breast cancer tumour sample. The test can help predict the risk that a woman’s breast cancer may recur and the likely benefit chemotherapy may have in reducing that risk.

Results from the TAILORx clinical trial showed women diagnosed with hormone receptor-positive, HER2-negative, node-negative early breast cancer may be able to avoid chemotherapy if they undergo the OncotypeDX test and receive a mid-range recurrence score.

The unreimbursed test currently costs Australian women \$5,000 putting it out of reach for many women who have gone on to endure chemotherapy – sometimes unnecessarily.

STA CEO Carlo Montagner said the new finance option followed six “frustrating” attempts to have the Oncotype DX test reimbursed by the federal government for all eligible breast cancer patients, as is the case in many countries around the world.

“We have tried on multiple occasions to have this test reimbursed for Australian

women. These efforts are ongoing, but we trust that in the interim, this new third-party finance arrangement will help many breast cancer patients afford this important technology which in turn, may help them to avoid chemotherapy," he said.

The last rejection by the Medical Services Advisory Committee was marked by an evaluation process in which a competitor made a submission just days before it was due to consider Oncotype DX. STA was not informed of the submission, let alone given an opportunity to respond, and it was only revealed through a Freedom of Information request.

Mr Montagner said he believes the partnership with Latitude Finance is the first time an Australian pharmaceutical company has engaged with a third-party financial institution to help patients fund access to a technology like the Oncotype DX test.

He told BioPharmaDispatch the arrangement "is a pity but what was the alternative?"

"Australians may have to reconcile themselves to this new reality. If decision-making does not change, these arrangements will be the natural consequence of no access or very delayed access."

He said, "This will pave the way for similar outcomes due to a lack of federal government funding for many therapies and treatments commonly available in other countries."

Under the terms of the agreement, Australian women who decide to take an Oncotype DX Breast Recurrence Score test can now use an interest-free two-year payment plan to pay for the one-off \$5,000 test. Patients will pay no interest, provided monthly repayments of up to \$208.00 are met.

"Avoiding chemotherapy when there is no proven benefit to be derived can spare many women from experiencing six months of aggressive treatment, which can be traumatic and debilitating. In some cases, it can result in permanent side effects.

"It is unfortunate for Australian women with breast cancer that the Oncotype DX test is not reimbursed as it is in many other developed countries, including the US, UK, Canada, Germany and other European territories.

"In those countries, it is widely used. The Oncotype DX test is recommended by the leading international cancer treatment guidelines as a test to help guide decisions about whether a woman actually needs chemotherapy or whether she can be treated with hormone therapy alone."

Mr Montagner added, “Without Federal Government funding and without accessible personal savings, hundreds of Australian women have been unable to afford this important test.

“As a company and a community, we must find new ways for all Australians to access new therapies and technologies that are recommended by their specialist doctors but are not reimbursed. This is a step in the right direction. STA is proud to partner with Latitude Finance, which has an established presence in healthcare and is now extending its offering in this space due to strong patient demand.”