

# **The Australian: 25 July, 2017**

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By Sarah-Jane Tasker 25 July 2017

### **New Push for Brain Cancer Drug**

Leading neurosurgeon Kate Drummond has called on the Turnbull government to break the “bureaucratic mould” and approve reimbursement of a drug that prolongs the life of Australian brain cancer patients.

The debate on access to the drug was reignited after US senator John McCain was diagnosed with an aggressive brain tumour.

Australian regulators earlier this year knocked back a request to reimburse the drug, Gliolan, which has just been approved in the US. The drug, used across Britain and Europe as standard care, “lights up” the brain tumour, which helps the surgeon to remove as much of it as possible.

More than 600 Australian patients a year could benefit from use of the drug in brain surgery but Dr Drummond, a neurosurgeon at Royal Melbourne Hospital, said because Gliolan’s definition sat between a drug and a surgical instrument it fell into a “grey area” for regulators.

“It shows that every so often something comes up that doesn’t fit the bureaucratic mould but if it’s good for patients the government should break that bureaucratic mould and get it sorted,” she said. “It is a simple thing, we know that people live longer if we remove as much of the tumour as is safely possible before a patient goes on to have radiation and chemotherapy. Anything that can help that is important.”

Dr Drummond said the price of the drug in the overall cost of a brain tumour operation was small given the greater outcome achieved. “There are several things we can do to improve a patient’s outcome but one of the things that has been proven to increase the amount of tumour that you remove is to use Gliolan,” she said.

“Some public hospitals are just wearing the cost and it is the private patients who are suffering, because if it’s not listed, most insurers won’t cover it.”

New Zealand started funding the brain tumour visualisation drug for its public hospitals from June 1 and the number of patients benefiting from the technology has already jumped. Denis Strangman, whose wife died in 2011 — 11 months after being diagnosed with a brain tumour — raised the issue of Gliolan at his recent appearance before the Senate committee into funding for cancers with low survival rates.

“I gave them verbal and written evidence on how it should be supported in Australia,” Mr Strangman, who founded the International Brain Tumour Alliance, said. He said he hoped the committee would make a recommendation, when it reported in November, to have the drug reimbursed to allow it to be more widely used in Australia to increase the quality of life of a patient and give them more time.

“The US regulator recently approved the drug and I wouldn’t mind betting that if McCain has surgery, he has surgery using that drug,” Mr Strangman said.