Alzheimer's drug access widened

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WIDER availability of four drugs used to treat Alzheimer's disease has been welcomed by one of the experts responsible for devising the original restrictions.

A PBAC review of the use of donepezil, rivastigmine, galantamine and memantine was initiated because of fears the drugs were being prescribed for too long, without improvement in rates of institutionalisation and death.

The drugs could only be prescribed beyond six months if the patient demonstrated a two-point improvement on the mini-mental state exam (MMSE).

From 1 May changes to the PBS mean patients can continue treatment for as long as their doctor and carers consider it effective. The review emphasised clinicians should exercise caution in interpreting small changes in the MMSE, which could be due to error, regression to the mean or the effect of repeated testing.

Around 900,000 Australians are expected to have dementia by 2050, more than half of whom will have Alzheimer's disease.

Professor Michael Woodward, head of aged care at Austin Health, initially advised the PBAC in devising rules designed to prove the efficacy of the drugs and was also involved in the review.

"We always knew it would be a difficult rule to administer and it has been," he said.

"We have been forced to rely on a single number that doesn't capture the full domain of improvement.

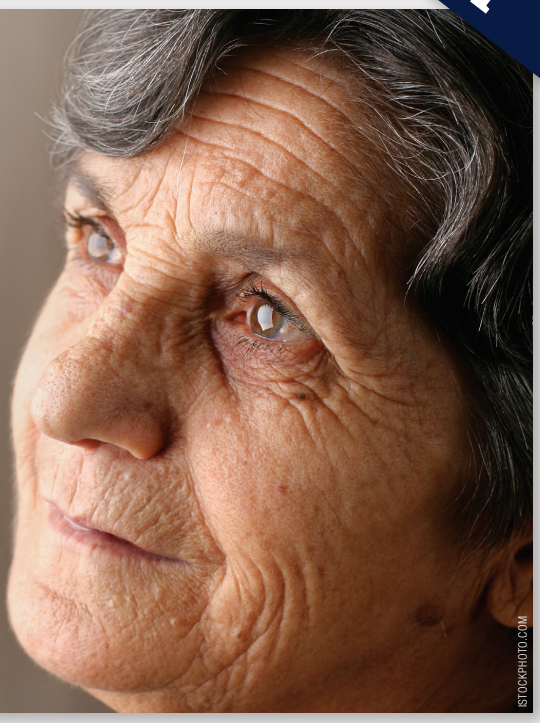
"And we have been tempted to let the MMSE creep in whichever direction has been required – and that's not good medicine. It's right that it has been addressed and this is much more sensible."

They were not wonder drugs, he said, but patients would now have more appropriate access.

The drugs have been subsidised through the PBS for the last decade. They cost $60 million last year alone, although a 40% reduction has now been negotiated for all brands of the four drugs.

A spokeswoman for the Department of Health and Ageing said this reduction was in addition to the statutory price reduction of 16% for donepezil, which came off patent this month.

Health Minister Tanya Plibersek said the review paved the way for the new generation of medicines to treat Alzheimer's disease which are "more likely to be added to existing treatments rather than to replace them".



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