

24th March 2020

Hon Greg Hunt MP
Minister for Health Member for Flinders
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Canberra, ACT 2600

URGENT

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Dear Minister Hunt

We appreciate these are difficult times and your energy and focus is on COVID-19 and apologise for taking up your valuable time.

We write to you as an organisation that represents patients and physicians who have extensive experience with the antimalarials, hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine, which are under investigation as potential treatments for Coronavirus (COVID-19). Both medications have been successfully used to treat lupus and rheumatoid arthritis for decades. **We are concerned that increased demand for these drugs attributed to COVID-19 has exacerbated their already limited availability for patients who rely on them to meet their medical needs. Therefore, we urge you to work with us and the broader health care community to help ensure continued availability of these drugs for the patients who are maintained on them to avoid disability, illness and even early death.**

Tens of thousands of Australians currently are prescribed hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine for lupus and rheumatoid arthritis, particularly when a patient's symptoms do not respond to other treatments. In fact, lupus, rheumatoid arthritis and malaria are the only indications for which these drugs are approved by the Therapeutic Goods and Administration (TGA). In many cases, there are no alternatives to hydroxychloroquine or chloroquine. For patients with lupus, hydroxychloroquine is the only medication shown to increase survival. Hydroxychloroquine is the cornerstone of therapy, used in most patients unless a contraindication exists.

Already today, many of our patients are not able to fill their prescriptions, due to major shortages of hydroxychloroquine, with validated reports across the country of pharmacies having depleted their supplies and half of the drugs' manufacturers reporting backorders. We have received a number of calls from patients who are very stressed and anxious, they get little support as it is from the government.

To date, limited data supports the efficacy of hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine for COVID-19. While we support rigorous clinical trials to investigate their potential use for COVID-19, it is imperative to preserve access to these medications for those patients whose lives and productivity depend on them.

However we note that the TGA has become aware that in recent days there has been considerable focus on the potential for hydroxychloroquine and the similar compound chloroquine (which is not marketed in Australia) to help in treating COVID-19. They also state that recent reports of increased off-label prescribing of medicines containing hydroxychloroquine have raised concerns that this will create a potential shortage of this product in Australia. TGA has taken steps to counter this issue and this is a good first step in ensuring the current availability of hydroxychloroquine to new and existing patients.

However the issue arises that if the trials are successful, will Lupus patients still be able to maintain the same level of medication for continued treatment given the massive upsurge in demand for the product. Therefore Minister we explicitly urge you to:

Work with the pharmaceutical industry, pharmacies and the TGA to:

- increase monitoring and timely reporting of shortages and to mitigate the shortage that has resulted from an increased demand for these drugs;
- utilize existing authorities to increase the production and supply of the drugs; and
- take action to ensure current supplies are allocated for patients taking them for indicated uses and that any increase in supply be available for continued access, not diverted for use in COVID-19.
- Communicate to the public, healthcare professionals, and other stakeholders accurate and up-to-date information about these drugs, their critical role in treatment for the current indications and
- the status of their use for COVID-19, including clinical trials underway and what is known or not known about the safety and efficacy of these drugs in COVID-19;
- Ensure sufficient supplies for the people who take these drugs for the indicated uses by implementing restrictions to minimize unnecessary prescribing or stockpiling of hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine solely for use in COVID-19;
- Monitor and take action as necessary to prevent unreasonable price increases or cost sharing for the drugs;
- Give patients who take these medications for indicated uses ongoing access to lengthier refills and supply of these medications to prepare them for emergency in case of sudden shortage and establish policies to assist patients with cost-sharing related to emergency supplies;

We recognize the urgent global need to find treatments for COVID-19 and to minimize the spread of the virus. Our organisation shares these priorities. At the same time, we are committed to the health of the patients we serve, which includes making sure that they have timely access to the medications and care upon which they have relied for decades. We stand ready to work with you and other stakeholders in this effort.

Thank you for your consideration of our concerns during this time. If you have any questions, please contact me at barbara.ward01@bigpond.com or president@lupusaust.org.au phone 0412 291 365.

Yours sincerely,



Barbara Ward
PRESIDENT

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