Question:

To ask the Department, given the understanding that Northern Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom that does not routinely commission or provide access to abiraterone and given the significant implications that this divergence this is likely to have, if you could be provided with the following information:

Equality, Fairness and Discrimination Assessments

- Any equality impact assessments**,** fairness assessments, or internal reviews carried out by the Department relating to the decision not to routinely commission abiraterone in Northern Ireland.
- Any documents or communications discussing whether this divergence may constitute geographical discrimination or create unequal access for NI patients compared with the rest of the UK.
- Any assessments of the psychological, emotional, or quality-of-life impact on NI patients arising from being denied access to a treatment available elsewhere in the UK.

Individual Funding Requests (IFRs)

For the period from the date [Drug Name] became routinely available in the rest of the UK to the present**,** please provide:

- The number of IFR requests submitted by clinicians for access to abiraterone for NI patients.
- The number of IFR requests approved**.**
- The number of IFR requests rejected**.**
- The reasons recorded for rejection**,** broken down by category if available.
- Any internal guidance or criteria used to assess IFR applications for this drug.

Policy Rationale for Divergence

- Any documents, internal communications, or briefing papers explaining why Northern Ireland is the only UK nation not routinely providing this treatment.
- Any correspondence with NICE, NHS England, or other UK health bodies regarding the implications of NI's non-adoption.
- Any analysis of the clinical, financial, or ethical implications of NI's divergence from the rest of the UK.
- Any plans, proposals, or timelines under consideration for routine commissioning of abiraterone in Northern Ireland.
- Any internal discussions regarding the need to address UK-wide inequality in access to this treatment.

Response:

As part of the Department's equality screening process and in compliance with Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the Department will complete an equality screening template which is in addition to NICE's equality screening process. An equality screening template is completed for all NICE Technology Appraisals (TAs) and these can be found on the Departments website here.

The Department does not however hold any equality impact assessments**,** fairness assessments, or internal reviews carried out by the Department in relation to the decision **'**not to routinely commission abiraterone in Northern Ireland'**.**

An Individual Funding Request, or IFR, can be made by your hospital consultant if they believe that a particular treatment or service that is licensed but is not routinely offered by Health and Social Care (HSC) in Northern Ireland is the best treatment for you, given your individual clinical circumstances.

The Department's Strategic Planning and Performance Group (SPPG) have not however received any requests from clinicians for abiraterone via IFR within the time period specified in your request. If a request were to be received, it would assessed using the Department's IFR Policy and Standard Operating Procedure, see Appendix 1 and 2 (attached). Further information relating to IFRs can be found here https://online.hscni.net/our-work/ifrs/

The Department has a formal link with NICE under which NICE Technology Appraisals are reviewed locally for their legal and policy applicability in Northern Ireland. Where found to be applicable, they are endorsed for implementation within HSC organisations. This link has ensured that Northern Ireland has access to up-to-date, independent, professional, evidence-based guidance on the value of health care interventions. In practice this means that treatments that have been recommended by NICE for routine use in the NHS in England are also routinely available in Northern Ireland.

Where NICE has recommended the use of abiraterone (Zytiga®) in the treatment of prostate cancer, this medicine is available to eligible patients in Northern Ireland, in line with the current NICE guidelines. Further information on this treatment is available via the following links:

https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ta259
https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ta387
https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ta951
https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ta1110

In circumstances where NICE is yet to complete a full appraisal, or does not recommend a particular drug, the Department's SPPG does not routinely commission that therapy for use in Northern Ireland. Unlike other parts of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland does not have its own health technology assessment body or equivalent to NICE, Scottish Medicines Consortium or All Wales Medicine Strategy Group, that could make a bespoke determination for Northern Ireland patients in the absence of NICE guidance.

The Department has recently published a review of HSC medicines access arrangements which recognises the need to take action to ensure continued access to clinically and cost-effective medicines for the Northern Ireland population on an equitable basis, including in cases where NICE have not made a determination, but use is supported by clinical evidence and best practice. Informed by the review's recommendations, the Department plans to review the existing workforce infrastructure underpinning medicines access pathways to identify potential resource requirements needed to strengthen existing regional medicine access arrangements, including for making NI-wide recommendations on the use of off-label and off-patent medicines where use is supported by clinical evidence and best practice.

Any additional resource requirements for medicines access infrastructure, and any additional costs associated with regional provision of access for off-label or off-patent medicines, will need to be considered within the context of the Department's challenging financial position and competing priorities.

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