



Te Ngākau Kahukura

Te Ngākau Kahukura submission on Pharmac's proposals to widen access to progesterone and antiretrovirals

Te Ngākau Kahukura is a national initiative that works to change systems and environments around rainbow¹ people to make sure they are affirming, welcoming and non-discriminatory. We work with professionals, organisations and wider systems that provide health, social and education support to people in Aotearoa. We provide advice, best practice guidance and training to support systems change.

Our vision is an Aotearoa where rainbow people grow up feeling safe, valued and like they belong in the places where they live, learn and access healthcare and social support.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on these proposals. We would like to note that our comments relate to ensuring that rainbow people have equitable access to medicines. Our backgrounds are as public health advocates, not as prescribing doctors.

Progesterone

We support the proposal to remove all funding restrictions for progesterone.

As is noted in the proposal, one of the current uses of progesterone is as part of gender-affirming healthcare – that is, healthcare that affirms a person's gender and increases congruence between their body and their gender or sense of self². This use of progesterone is still a developing area where there has been limited research. Some trans women, transfeminine people and non-binary people currently receive progesterone as part of their gender-affirming healthcare, though it is not regarded by all clinicians as being a standard aspect of hormone treatment.

In the context of gender-affirming healthcare, progesterone may be sought in order to achieve transition goals such as hormone levels that are equivalent to cisgender women (possibly including cyclical changes in hormone levels), breast growth, skin softness, or mood changes. Some clinicians also prescribe progesterone in order to reduce the dosage of estrogen (and associated risks) and to allow trans women access to other protective effects which have been studied in cis women and may also be relevant to trans women (such as bone density)^{3,4}. Evidence suggests that micronised

¹ We use *rainbow* as an umbrella term to describe people whose sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and/or sex characteristics differ from majority, binary norms. This include people who identify with terms like takatāpui, lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersex, transgender, queer, non-binary or fa'afafine, as well as people who don't use specific words for their identity, people whose identity changes over time, and people who are in the process of understanding their own identity and may not have 'come out' to themselves or others. It's estimated that people under the rainbow umbrella make up between 6 and 15% of New Zealand's population.

² Professional Association for Transgender Health Aotearoa. (2020). *Transgender Health: Briefing to the Incoming Minister of Health 2020*. Retrieved from: <https://patha.nz/2020-briefing>

³ Lieberman, A., & Curtis, L. (2017). In defense of progesterone: a review of the literature. *Alternative Therapies in Health & Medicine*, 23(7).

⁴ Prior, J. C. (2019). Progesterone is important for transgender women's therapy—applying evidence for the benefits of progesterone in ciswomen. *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism*, 104(4), 1181-1186.

progesterone has a significantly safer risk profile than progestins which may otherwise be prescribed.

The proposal to remove funding restrictions for progesterone will mean that trans people are more able to access progesterone through an ‘informed consent’ process, that is, by making their own supported decision with the prescribing doctor, given clear information about the known risks and benefits⁵. Where a trans person is working with a doctor who supports informed consent, they will have more ready access to a safer medication at a lower cost.

The cost of medications is a particularly important equity issue for trans women, who are often economically marginalised. For example, the 2020 Household Economic Survey found trans women had the lowest levels of disposable income of all groups within cisgender and transgender/non-binary populations⁶.

Emtricitabine with tenofovir disoproxil

We support the proposal to widen access from 1 July 2022.

We support the New Zealand AIDS Foundation’s position that PrEP has an important role to play as part of the effort to end new HIV transmissions in New Zealand by 2025⁷, and note that HIV infection is a health issue that disproportionately affects rainbow communities, particularly men who have sex with men⁸ and transgender people⁹.

Current eligibility criteria for PrEP has created barriers to access, and meant that the medication has not been available to all people who would benefit from it. The proposed changes to eligibility criteria will remove the need for people to disclose, or lie about, details of their sexual practices to doctors in order to access medication¹⁰.

The updated criteria will also make PrEP more equitably available to people who are at risk of contracting HIV, regardless of their gender or sex characteristics, by removing ambiguity about whether transgender and intersex people are eligible.

Antiretrovirals

We support the proposal to widen access from 1 July 2022, and suggest changes in the language used to describe eligibility to ensure equitable access for transgender and intersex people.

⁵ Oliphant, J., Veale, J., Macdonald, J., Carroll, R., Johnson, R., Harte, M., Stephenson, C., & Bullock, J. (2018). *Guidelines for gender affirming healthcare for gender diverse and transgender children, young people and adults in Aotearoa New Zealand*. Transgender Health Research Lab, University of Waikato, 2018.

⁶ Stats NZ. (2021). *LGBT+ population of Aotearoa: Year ended June 2020*. Retrieved from: <https://www.stats.govt.nz/reports/lgbt-plus-population-of-aotearoa-year-ended-june-2020>

⁷ New Zealand AIDS Foundation. (2019). *NZAF Position Statement: PrEP*. Retrieved from: https://www.nzaf.org.nz/media/1344/nzaf-position-statement-pre-exposure-prophylaxis-prep_updated-december-2019.pdf

⁸ New Zealand AIDS Foundation. (2020). *Briefing to the Incoming Parliament 2020-2023*. Retrieved from: https://www.nzaf.org.nz/media/2507/nzaf-briefing-to-incoming-parliament_2020.pdf

⁹ UNAIDS. (2021). HIV and transgender and other gender-diverse people — Human rights fact sheet series 2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/documents/2021/04-hiv-human-rights-factsheet-transgender-gender-diverse>

¹⁰ For example McKee, J. (2022). *Doctors break rules for prescribing safe-sex drug as Pharmac considers change*. Retrieved from: <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/463805/doctors-break-rules-for-prescribing-safe-sex-drug-as-pharmac-considers-change>

As the New Zealand AIDS Foundation has noted, the criteria for accessing post-exposure prophylaxis have been outdated and not in line with the use of PEP as part of a national effort to eliminate new HIV transmissions by 2025¹¹.

The proposal will widen access to more people who are at risk of contracting HIV. We support the NZAF's submissions around widening this criteria further to encompass all groups who are at risk of contracting HIV.

We strongly recommend that the 'notes' explaining the meaning of 'unprotected receptive vaginal sex' are removed. The notes do not add extra clarity about the meaning of this phrase, but introduce ambiguity around eligibility, particularly for transgender and intersex people. This is because not all receptive partners in vaginal sex are female, and not all insertive partners are male. The way that criteria are framed and worded should be based on risk of contracting HIV, and not on cisnormative assumptions about people's genders based on their body parts and the types of sex they engage in. Removing these two notes would help ensure equitable access to PEP for transgender and intersex people.

Nitrofurantoin modified release

We have no comment to make on these proposals.

¹¹ New Zealand AIDS Foundation. (2020). *Briefing to the Incoming Parliament 2020-2023*. Retrieved from: https://www.nzaf.org.nz/media/2507/nzaf-briefing-to-incoming-parliament_2020.pdf