

WHO MOVES A STEP CLOSER TO CHEAPER BREAST CANCER TREATMENT

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

The bio-therapeutic medicines are produced from biological sources such as cells rather than synthesised chemicals. | Representational image

The World Health Organization (WHO) announced Wednesday that it had for the first time approved a “biosimilar” medicine — one derived from living sources rather than chemicals — to make breast cancer treatment affordable to women globally.

The Trastuzumab drug has shown “high efficacy” in curing early stage breast cancer and in some cases more advanced forms of the disease, the WHO said in a statement.

But the annual cost of the original drug is an average (of) \$20,000, “a price that puts it out of reach of many women and healthcare systems in most countries,” the statement added.

However the biosimilar version of trastuzumab is generally 65% cheaper than the original.

“With this WHO listing, and more products expected in the pre-qualification pipeline, prices should decrease even further,” the WHO said.

The cheaper but equally effective bio-therapeutic medicines are produced from biological sources such as cells rather than synthesised chemicals.

They are usually manufactured by companies after the patent on the original product has expired.

“WHO pre-qualification of bio-similar trastuzumab is good news for women everywhere,” said WHO director general Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

“Women in many cultures suffer from gender disparity when it comes to accessing health services. In poor countries, there is the added burden of a lack of access to treatment for many, and the high cost of medicines.

“Effective, affordable breast cancer treatment should be a right for all women, not the privilege of a few,” he added.

A few bio-similars of trastuzumab have come on the market in recent years, but none had previously been pre-qualified by WHO.

WHO pre-qualification gives countries the assurance that they are purchasing “quality health products”.

“We need to act now and try to avoid more preventable deaths,” said Dr. Mariangela Simao, WHO assistant director general for Medicines and Health Products.

“The availability of bio-similars has decreased prices, making even innovative treatments more affordable and hopefully available to more people.”

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