ViiV Healthcare Expands HIV Drug Access Programs

October 12, 2010

ViiV Healthcare, which makes several antiretroviral (ARV) drugs, is expanding programs to help HIV-positive people access the company's medications. According to ViiV, these moves are meant to address the growing challenges people with HIV have in getting medication during the economic downturn.

ViiV Healthcare is a global pharmaceutical company formed in November 2009 by the HIV/AIDS divisions of GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) and Pfizer. ViiV specializes in developing and marketing HIV treatments. It currently markets 11 ARV therapies, including Epzicom (abacavir and lamivudine), Selzentry (maraviroc) and Lexiva (fosamprenavir).

ViiV has had in place two programs to help people with HIV access and pay for their ARV therapy: a patient assistance program (PAP)—which provides free ViiV medications to those with no insurance—and a pharmacy co-payment assistance program—which covers up to $100 of a person's health insurance co-payment for ViiV drugs. This program was initially slated to run for one year.

With unemployment still at record highs and state budgets crumbling under the weight of the economic downturn, thousands of people have lost their health insurance or have been put on waiting lists for AIDS Drug Assistance Programs (ADAPs). And for those with private health insurance, prescription co-pays remain a significant challenge, especially during periods of financial hardship.

"We recognize this is a time of increasing patient need, and this demonstrates our commitment to continue addressing access issues in the United States," said Bill Collier, head of ViiV Healthcare in North America. He outlined three actions the company will take to address these emerging problems.

First, the company has promised to extend its co-pay assistance program for two more years. The co-payment program covers the first $100 of a person's co-payment for each ViiV medication.

The program will now also be available to people residing in Puerto Rico.

Second, the company's PAP will now be available to people with higher incomes than before.

Previously, the program was only available to a rather small segment of uninsured people who made just a bit too much to qualify for Medicaid. ViiV is raising the income limit to join the program from 250 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL)—about $13,000 per year for a single person—to 500 percent of FPL.

Third, ViiV has joined, on a pilot basis, a joint program between the nonprofit Welvista organization and the pharmaceutical industry to easily and quickly provide free HIV medications to people on ADAP waiting lists. The Welvista program was built to ensure that these people don't fall through the cracks and forgo needed ARV treatment.

"The fear or belief that access to medicines may be interrupted or that the access to HIV medicines is decreasing may prevent many persons struggling with an HIV diagnoses and its implications from seeking treatment," said Julie Scofield, the executive director of the National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors. "While we must continue our advocacy for increased federal and state funding for AIDS Drug Assistance Programs, [ViiV's] efforts to increase access can help to remove this climate of fear that the meds aren't as available today."

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