

Cancer drugs priced for the fortunate few

High cost of new medications burdens patients, strains Medicare

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NEW YORK - They are the cancer drugs doctors and patients have sought for years. They target and kill cancer cells — often with fewer side effects than traditional chemotherapy — but they come with a huge price tag.

“The costs have skyrocketed so high,” says Dr. Deborah Schrag, of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, “that even patients with insurance — good insurance plans — are having trouble with the co-pays.”

Examples of the annual cost for some drugs:

- Tarceva for lung cancer: \$35,000
- Herceptin for breast cancer: \$38,000
- Avastin for colon cancer: \$54,000
- Erbitux for colon cancer: \$110,000

“The drugs work, and therefore patients are taking therapy for longer periods of time,” says Dr. Leonard Saltz, also of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. “So, we not only have a high cost of a drug, but they are taking it for very long period of time, raising quite a bill.”

Sherry Longergan has been fighting ovarian cancer for five years. Other drugs stopped working, so her doctor put her on Avastin. It is shrinking her tumors, but her insurance company won't pay because the drug is only approved for colon cancer. So she and her husband Dana are spending \$8,000 a month themselves.

"I'm not going to let this ovarian get to me," Longergan says.

"I plan to be here. So where is our money going to come from?"

Why are the prices of cancer drugs so high? Drug companies refuse to talk about how they set prices, and under the law, they can charge whatever they want.

Medicare, which does not cover most drugs, does pay for cancer drugs and it is creating a huge problem.

"Sooner or later," says Saltz, "we're going to find a situation where there's just not enough money in the till to pay for these drugs for everybody."

Indeed, experts say the new cancer drugs are becoming one of the biggest strains on the entire health care system.

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