



15<sup>th</sup> October 2020

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

EMBARGOED UNTIL 11.00AM THURSDAY 15 OCTOBER

### **PRIME MINISTER COMMITTED TO PHARMAC INVESTIGATION, BUT HEALTH MINISTER AT ODDS**

On 30 September Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern committed to having an investigation into Pharmac's decision-making processes, the same day she received an open letter endorsed by 105 medical professionals slamming Pharmac's processes, but official correspondence shows Health Minister Chris Hipkins appears not to have heard about it.

Earlier in the day Act Leader David Seymour announced an independent review of Pharmac as policy. Then under pressure that evening from host Patrick Gower in the Newshub Leaders Debate, both the Labour and National leaders agreed to a Pharmac investigation (with the Greens joining the call a week later).

But despite the PM's public commitment, Crohn's & Colitis New Zealand Charitable Trust Chair Dr Richard Stein, who has long been raising the need for a review of Pharmac, received a template response from Minister Hipkins dismissing the issue. (Read the Minister's letter and Dr. Stein's response [here](#).)

"Even without the PM's commitment, the loss of confidence in Pharmac by over 100 medical professionals should by itself be compelling enough to stop the Health Minister from continuing to shelter an agency that is patently failing to meet the objectives set by the Government to provide the best health outcomes for New Zealanders.

"It is also clear that the tide of public opinion has turned on Pharmac. Over 64,000 concerned people have signed petitions calling for change. While we are waiting, patients suffering with serious diseases are having to take to the streets or turn to the media to have their voices heard.

"It is time for the Prime Minister and the Health Minister to listen to its own experts and the public and give a clear and unqualified assurance that an independent review of Pharmac's processes and operation will be carried out with urgency," said Dr Stein.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Richard Stein".

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**About Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis<sup>1</sup>:**

- Crohn's and ulcerative colitis are chronic, incurable, autoimmune diseases collectively known as Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD).
- Over 20,000 New Zealanders have IBD.
- New Zealand has the third highest IBD rate in the world.
- Most people are diagnosed in childhood, their teens or early adulthood, and suffer with these illnesses their entire lives. Children in particular are impacted in their most formative years.
- Symptoms are severe, urgent, bloody diarrhoea, bowel blockages, abdominal pain, perforated intestines, and abscesses and inflammation in the anal area.
- 'Flares' of the disease are common and frequently involve emergency hospitalisation, and repeated irreversible surgeries to remove sections of the bowel.
- Many patients are forced to live with a permanent ostomy (bag).
- IBD has an array of other symptoms including arthritis, diseases of the spine, the liver, diseases of the eyes, skin lesions, and an increased risk of bowel cancer.
- NZ has one of the highest per capita rates of IBD in the world, and it is growing at over 5% per year.
- IBD has profound physical, social and psychological impacts on those living with it, affecting their education, social relationships, work lives, and their ability to have a family.

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<sup>1</sup> Snively, S (2017) Reducing the Growing Burden of Inflammatory Bowel Disease in New Zealand.  
<https://www.burdenofibd.org.nz/research>

- IBD costs NZ an estimated \$245 million in healthcare costs and lost productivity.
- There are two effective, but currently unfunded treatments for people with severe Crohn's and Colitis who have failed to respond to medications currently available in NZ :
  - o ustekinumab, which was approved by Medsafe in early 2018, has been given high priority by Pharmac's gastroenterology sub committee, but has not been funded by Pharmac; and
  - o vedolizumab, which is currently awaiting Medsafe registration.

Visit the petition site at [www.wecantwait.nz](http://www.wecantwait.nz)