Fair Pricing Coalition Voices Concern About High Cost of Merck's Victrelis

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Merck has priced its new hepatitis C drug, Victrelis (boceprevir), out of reach of many of those who need it, according to a Fair Pricing Coalition (FPC) statement. Taking Victrelis costs $1,100 per week, which adds up to $26,400 to $48,400 over a 24- to 48-week course of treatment. And Victrelis must be taken in combination with pegylated interferon and ribavirin, which themselves cost $30,000 per course of treatment.

While Victrelis is the first new hep C drug to go on sale in 10 years, other meds are in the pipeline. The FPC is concerned that Victrelis's pricing will negatively impact the prices of its rivals and successors, with combination regimens costing as high as $150,000 to $200,000 per course of treatment. "You can bet that no future HCV drugs will be priced less than Victrelis. This is a very bad start," said FPC member Lynda Dee. "We understand that drug development costs a lot of money, but there is no reason for a drug from the protease inhibitor class to be so expensive."

Meanwhile, there are other costs to be considered. According to a paper presented at the annual conference of the American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases (AASLD), the costs of treating the side effects of HCV protease inhibitors such as Victrelis are expected to be 30 percent higher than for existing treatments. And many of those with hepatitis C suffer from other illnesses. Some have diabetes or bleeding disorders; others are coinfected with HIV. All of these add completely new sets of medical expenses.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimates that 2.7 to 3.9 million Americans are living with hepatitis C and that roughly 20,000 Americans contract the virus each year.

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