NEW ANTIVIRAL MEDICATIONS TO TREAT COVID-19 APPROVED IN THE UK

The search for a "COVID cure" continues. Molnupiravir, is the first medication to be approved anywhere in the world for treatment of COVID. Introduction of new medicines is often not without controversy. We summarize currently known aspects of these medications below to help you navigate this difficult area.

The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) in the UK approved the first oral antiviral drug for use as the trial data has shown an almost 50% reduction in hospitalisations and/or death in those with mild to moderate COVID infection. The FDA in the USA will hold an advisory committee meeting on the 30th of November to consider granting a licence for use.

Several governments globally have begun to create stockpiles of Molnupiravir in anticipation of its authorization by their respective regulatory bodies. Governments have also speculatively begun to create stockpiles of other drugs they believe may go one to demonstrate good efficacy in the treatment of COVID. Though currently there is little data available on the trials in progress.

This will hopefully see enable patients to be more effectively cared for in the community as opposed to needing hospital treatment, easing some of the strain on healthcare systems placed by the coronavirus pandemic.

With healthcare systems better able to cope with overall demand, it is anticipated that healthcare outcomes for their populations will improve.

Protecting healthcare systems from collapse has been a prominent feature of many governments' response to the pandemic; so, a drug which can contribute to this intention could be a turning point in the fight against COVID.

However, the trials of Molnupiravir need to be considered carefully. The aim of the medication is to create virus mutations so that viruses cannot replicate and cause severe COVID disease, but the risk of mutation to a more aggressive form of the virus has not been studied widely and remains a significant risk.

The other concern from observers in this scientific field is that Molnupiravir could cause mutations in the genetic code (DNA) of those patients who receive it, with potential risk to cells leading to the development of cancers or damage to reproductive cells in the future.

Another drug, Favipiravir, which has the same active metabolite as Molnupiravir was not approved in the US or in the UK for this very reason. So, it remains of concern to some that the trials were halted at the very first sign of Molnupiravir being effective without allowing them to run their full course, as some of the more significant side effects may have taken some time to reveal themselves.

Throughout the pandemic governments have continually had a difficult choice between human life and economic damage to balance, the difficulties continue despite the development of these new medications.

Further Information:

- https://www.fda.gov/news-events/press-announcements/fda-hold-advisory-committee-meeting-discuss-merck-and-ridgebacks-eua-application-covid-19-oral
- https://www.bmj.com/content/375/bmj.n2422?ijkey=e1a62051724ec75d02aeca585badcddeda66f0d9&keytype2=tf_ipsecsha
- https://www.merck.com/news/merck-and-ridgebacks-investigational-oral-antiviral-molnupiravir-reduced-the-risk-of-hospitalization-or-death-by-approximately-50-percent-compared-to-placebo-for-patients-with-mild-or-moderat/