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National

Woman must pay \$1500 a week to stay alive; drug not on Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme

- By **Hannah Martin**
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Bowel cancer sufferer Dorothy Thurley and her husband Howard. Picture: Roger Lovell

- Woman, 59, fighting bowel cancer
- Told drug not on PBS her only hope
- Drug costs her \$1500 per week

A TASMANIAN cancer sufferer will have to fork out \$1500 a week for treatment to save her life.

Dorothy Thurley, 59, has been fighting bowel cancer for eight years and has been told she has one last chance to live - a widely used drug not covered by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme.

She applied for a credit card last week to pay more than \$7600 for the first four doses, **The Mercury said** (http://www.themercury.com.au/article/2011/05/29/233801_todays-news.html) .

The Tasmanian Government last week said it would not lobby Federal Health Minister Nicola Roxon, despite bowel cancer patients and oncologists around the country pleading for Erbitux to be listed on the PBS.

The manufacturer of Erbitux is giving the drug free to participants in an Australian clinical trial, but has suspended access to the program.

Mrs Thurley said: "I've got no other options. It's the end of the road for me if I don't try this drug."

The Ranelagh grandmother has no money left after forking out \$20,000 for the last drug she was on for 3½ years. It was recently added to the PBS and now costs only \$34 a prescription.

Paying for the drug chewed up the meagre superannuation Mrs Thurley had saved from her work as a teacher aide.

She is now too sick to work and her husband Howard is preparing to leave the job he has had for the past 41 years to look after her.

If Mrs Thurley's cancer responds to Erbitux, it could cost the couple up to \$60,000 a year.

"Unless the bank gives me a credit card, which they know I can't pay for, I don't know what we'll do," she said.

"I've had all the chemo you can poke a stick at, that keeps the disease at bay. I've lost my hair twice. I've had every other experimental drug I could try."

A desperate Mrs Thurley is loath to complain, but knows there are other cancer sufferers in a similar situation.

"I just want to try to set a precedent for other people coming up the road behind me, so they don't have to go through this," she said.

The Gut Foundation, the national bowel cancer organisation, has said about 2000 people would benefit if Erbitux was subsidised under the PBS. It would cost taxpayers \$30 million a year and cost patients no more than \$35 a script.

The drug - subsidised in Canada and the UK - can add years to the life expectancy of bowel cancer sufferers.

But Tasmanian Health Minister Michelle O'Byrne said the Government could not be seen to support a particular drug company.

"The responsibility for the PBS rests with the Commonwealth, with the state participating in regular Ministerial Councils to discuss significant issues," she said.

"I think it is important that questions about the availability of drugs on the PBS are answered clinically and not politically but I do understand that these issues have an enormous impact on individuals."

Read more on this story and see a picture of Dorothy at *The Mercury* (http://www.themercury.com.au/article/2011/05/29/233801_todays-news.html) .

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