February 8, 2013

Support for the inclusion of whole blood and red blood cells in the WHO Model List of Essential Medicines in relation to cancer treatment

Dear Committee Members,

We are writing to support the inclusion of Whole Blood and Red Blood Cells in the WHO Model List of Essential Medicines in view of the crucial role of blood transfusion for many patients undergoing cancer treatments.

The Union for International Cancer Control (UICC) is a NGO in official relations with WHO. Established in 1933 and based in Geneva, UICC is a membership organisation comprising over 770 members in more than 150 countries.

The Center for Global Cancer Medicine of the Dana-Farber cancer Institute oversees the Institute's activities in the developing world.

Along with two applications to add cancer medicines, we respectfully invite the Expert Committee to request a review of the antineoplastic section of the WHO Model list of Essential Medicine to be achieved by its next meeting in 2015. In order to comprehensively address cancer care through the WHO Model EML, we believe that there is a clear necessity to articulate cancer medicines with other indispensable treatments that cancer patients need along the cancer care continuum. Indeed, blood transfusion often constitutes an indispensable and life-saving element for many patients.

As you are aware, blood product support is a critical component of safe and effective treatment of many cancers. For children with acute lymphoblastic leukemia, for instance, treatment with effective chemotherapy often results in need for both red blood cell and platelet transfusion support, without which the patient is at risk for death from bleeding or heart failure. This is a disease, largely of children and young adults, with a high cure rate when treated with affordable and available chemotherapy currently on the WHO EML. Administration of this life-saving chemotherapy without blood product support results in unnecessary risk to the patient, and represents sub-optimal care.

Despite the need for blood transfusion at many stages of cancer treatment, access to blood component in conditions of safety and quality is very scarce in many LMICs. We strongly believe that, in addition to the definition of blood components as a pharmaceutical product, the inclusion of Whole Blood and Red Blood Cells in the WHO Model list of Essential Medicines would scale up the global availability of, and equitable access to this indispensable therapeutic support to patients undergoing cancer treatment in conditions of safety and quality.

In light of the above, we urge the Expert Committee on the Selection and Use of Essential Medicines to add Whole Blood and Red Blood Cells into the WHO Model List.

Sincerely,

Lawrence N. Shulman, MD  
Chief of Staff and Sr. VP for Medical Affairs  
Dana-Farber Cancer Institute

Julie Torode  
Director Advocacy & Programmes /Deputy CEO  
Union for International Cancer Control (UICC)