

The decision-making process at NHS Scotland's drugs approval body is to be reviewed, following concerns about the inconsistent availability of certain medicines.

Scottish health secretary Alex Neil said the review of the Scottish Medicines Consortium (SMC) was in response to concerns about raised by patients, clinicians and charities.

The SMC's role is to evaluate all newly licensed medicines and advise NHS boards on their clinical effectiveness and value for money.

Following a green light from the SMC, health boards draw up a set of criteria for prescribing medicines. If medicines to not receive the go-ahead, then health boards do not make them routinely available.

But individual doctors can prescribe medicines that are not accepted for routine use for patients in certain circumstances via patient treatment requests.

Cancer Research UK's public affairs manager in Scotland, Vicky Crichton, welcomed the review.

She said: "In a health system with limited resources, SMC does an essential and difficult job well. But there have been concerns raised about patients's ability to access effective medicines.

"It's important to look at the evidence and make sure the system is robust so that patients get the best treatments at a good price for the NHS. We look forward to making our contribution to the review."

The new review will assess the systems by which new medicines are made available across

NHS Scotland, from the national level to local decision-making, Mr Neil said.

The SMC's assessment processes will be benchmarked against similar organisations elsewhere to test their effectiveness by independent expert Professor Philip Routledge.

Meanwhile, chief pharmaceutical officer Professor Bill Scott will look at how the SMC's decisions are implemented by NHS boards to try to deliver a consistent approach across the whole of Scotland.

Mr Neil said: "We know that the SMC is globally respected and has the fastest and most efficient medicine review process anywhere in the UK.

"Some clinicians, charities and patients have, though, raised concerns about access to medicines, so it is only right that we look at ways that we could potentially improve access arrangements.

"Scotland's NHS is renowned as being at the forefront of new technologies and innovation - I want to make sure that the same is true of access to new medicines."

SMC chair, Professor Angela Timoney, said the consortium was confident that its work was "rigorous" and of high quality, adding that people from around the globe visited Scotland to learn from its approach.

"We are always willing to learn lessons from other countries so my colleagues and I will support Professor Routledge in his work," she said.

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