

Hon Andrew Little

Minister of Health

Minister Responsible for the GCSB

Minister Responsible for the NZSIS

Minister for Treaty of Waitangi Negotiations

Minister Responsible for Pike River Re-entry

Lead Coordination Minister for the Government's Response to the Royal Commission's Report into the Terrorist Attack on the Christchurch Mosques



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Tēnā koe Maria Lowe

The Ministry of Health's role in a review of medication brand switching

Thank you for your letter dated 30 May 2021, on behalf of the Trust Board of Epilepsy Waikato Charitable Trust (EWCT) regarding the Ministry of Health's role in reviewing brand switching of anti-seizure medications. I also received your letter from Professor David Lowe in his role as the EWCT Chair. Professor Lowe is copied into this letter to respond to you both.

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge the work you do for your community, including highlighting issues from the perspective of people with epilepsy. I am aware that the brand change for lamotrigine caused significant concern. The change has been the subject of several reviews, including a complaint to the Health and Disability Commissioner, a petition to the Health Select Committee, an independent review of Pharmac's communications and decision-making processes conducted by Claro Law, and an investigation by the Chief Coroner into the deaths of six people who were taking Logem.

I acknowledge the distress of the families who have lost loved ones and, along with the Ministry, welcome the Coroner's findings and recommendations. While the Chief Coroner found that the evidence did not clearly link the brand change to the deaths, she found deficiencies in brand change information. In response to this finding and the Claro Law review results, Pharmac accepts it has a responsibility to ensure health professionals are informed about brand changes and that patients have access to the information they need.

As you note, the Ministry is leading work with Pharmac and organisations representing prescribers and Pharmacists to address the matters raised by the Health and Disability Commissioner about the management of brand changes in general and the lamotrigine brand change in particular. The work will also include consideration of the findings of the Chief Coroner.

The work focuses on three key areas:

- Pharmac's approach to communicating brand changes, in particular ways to deliver information that is timely, consistent and accurate.

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- Working with representative organisations of prescribers and pharmacists, and Pharmac to clarify their individual and collective responsibilities.
- Strengthening the role practice management systems can play in ensuring prescribers and Pharmacists have all relevant information on medicines, particularly in the context of brand changes.

The issues you raise are relevant to each of these areas, and I have sent your letter to the Ministry officials involved in this work.


The Director-General of Health has undertaken to report to the Health and Disability Commissioner in August 2021 on the results of the work in response to her concerns and its recommendations for system-wide changes.

The Director-General of Health has mentioned the Health and Disability Commissioner's comments to the Chair of the independent review of Pharmac, which is due to report to me in December 2021. Brand change management is relevant to that review, as it focuses on how well Pharmac performs against its objectives and whether and how those objectives should be changed.

Brand changes for medications may be required in future and may involve higher risk medications, including anti-seizure treatments. The work the Ministry, Pharmac, and health professional organisations are doing now will help ensure that the critical parts of the system around brand changes are strong and are focused on protecting patients' health and wellbeing.

Thank you again for writing.

Nāku noa, nā



Hon Andrew Little
Minister of Health

Cc: Professor David Lowe, Chair, Epilepsy Waikato Charitable Trust
Hon Tim McIndoe, Patron, Epilepsy Waikato Charitable Trust
Dr Ashley Bloomfield, Director-General of Health
Morag McDowall, Health and Disability Commissioner
Dr Gurav Sharma, Member of Parliament, Hamilton East