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Senate Finance and Public Administration Committees
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Via Email: fpa.sen@aph.gov.au

15 July 2011

To whom it may concern,

Re Inquiry into the Government's administration of the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme

The Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations (AFAO) is the national federation for the HIV community response. AFAO's members are the AIDS Councils in each state and territory; the National Association of People Living with HIV/AIDS (NAPWA); the Australian Injecting & Illicit Drug Users League (AIVL); the Anwernekenhe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander HIV/AIDS Alliance (ANA); and Scarlet Alliance, Australian Sex Workers Association.

AFAO advocates for its member organisations, promotes medical and social research into HIV and its effects, develops and formulates policy on HIV issues, and provides HIV policy advice to Commonwealth, state and territory governments.

AFAO is pleased to provide comments to the Inquiry into the Government's administration of the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. Equitable access to pharmaceuticals is essential for all Australians, particularly for people who rely on prescription medicines to both sustain life and manage co-morbidities, such as people living with HIV. We are concerned that the recent deferral of listing medicines on the PBS that have already been approved by the independent Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee seriously threatens equitable access to essential medications.

We have had the opportunity to review the submission provided by the National Association of People Living with HIV/AIDS (NAPWA). We endorse NAPWA's submission, including comments relating to how deferral of listing pharmaceuticals for the PBS undermines community confidence in the integrity of the system.

We have also had the opportunity to review the submission provided by ACON and Positive Life, NSW. We endorse their submissions, and draw your attention to its outline of the serious medical consequences that people living with HIV may experience if they do not have access to the most efficacious pharmaceuticals.

We further note the following key points.

Universal access to pharmaceuticals is fundamental to the wellbeing of all Australians

It is essential that universal and equitable access to pharmaceuticals for all Australians be maintained. Fundamental to this is providing affordable access to optimal pharmaceuticals, where determinations

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are made according to scientific evidence, rather than by cost constraints or lobbying based on connections and corporate heft. Failing to preserve equitable access would compromise the Government's intention to promote and enhance preventative health care as a core feature of its health reform agenda.

Success of model-to-date in ensuring universal access

The current framework of PBS-based pharmaceutical access, informed by the advice of the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee, has been pivotal to providing Australians with ready and affordable access to high quality pharmaceuticals. The roll-out of HIV antiretrovirals continues to be leading edge science, with rapid developments in terms of both the release of new drugs and revision of combination therapy guidelines. The success of Australia's response to HIV has been due in part to this strong regulatory framework, which has allowed PBS approval processes to be responsive to scientific evidence on antiretroviral therapies. As a result, people living with HIV in Australia have had access to the latest and most efficacious drugs, regardless of means.

Deferring the listing of medicines on the PBS that have been approved by the independent Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee risks creating two classes of people; those who can themselves afford to meet the cost the most efficacious drugs as medically/scientifically recommended, and those who cannot - and who thus must access other less suitable drugs through the PBS.

If you wish to discuss this matter, please contact Linda Forbes, Manager, Policy and Communications on 02 8568 1109 or by e-mail at lforbes@afao.org.au

Yours sincerely,

Rob Lake
Executive Director
Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations