To: Ms. Mandisa Hela  
The Registrar of Medicines  
Medicines Control Council  
Private Bag X828  
Pretoria 0001  
Per email: helam@health.gov.za  
Per fax: +27 12 395 9201  

30 October 2014  

Dear Ms. Hela:

We, the undersigned clinicians, health care providers, DR-TB patients, and civil society organisations, commend the Medicines Control Council (MCC) on its June 26th, 2014 decision, granting Doctors Without Borders (MSF) authorisation to use a generic linezolid product in treatment regimens for selected patients with drug-resistant tuberculosis (DR-TB) in Khayelitsha, Western Cape1. This is an important first step toward expanding access to linezolid for DR-TB patients in South Africa. However, we urge the MCC to immediately register the same generic linezolid product currently under a fast-track review, in order to ensure linezolid is available for all DR-TB patients in need across the country.

The MSF application under section 21 of the Medicines and Related Substances Act 101 of 1965 (“the Act”) was based on the unaffordability of the brand name product, Zyvoxid. Prior to the MCC authorisation, MSF purchased Zyvoxid at the exorbitant private sector price of over R700 per 600mg tablet. The cost of this single drug consumed over 10% of the annual MSF operational budget for HIV and TB programmes in Khayelitsha, limiting the number of patients to whom linezolid could be offered. The generic product from manufacturer, Hetero, is purchased by MSF at less than R80 per tablet—a price reduction of over 88%—and provided in terms of the section 21 authorisation from the MCC.

Other clinicians in South Africa are also struggling to offer linezolid to all patients who might benefit from the drug’s use, due to the unaffordability of Zyvoxid. Patients who must access Zyvoxid through the private sector are finding it is not covered by their medical aid due to the high cost, and they cannot afford it on an out-of-pocket basis.2

The MCC granted MSF section 21 authorisation after confirming the Hetero product’s approval by the United Kingdom’s Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA)—a stringent drug regulatory authority and fellow member of the Pharmaceutical Inspection Co-operation Scheme (PIC/S). The same product dossier was submitted to the MCC for full registration in South Africa on the 29 April 2013, and granted fast-track approval status on 6 June 2013. Hetero made a full submission in this regard to the MCC on the 12 June 2013, after which the MCC should have supplied a decision within nine months, in line with Regulation 5 of the General Regulations made in terms of the Act. Over 16 months have now passed, with no decision concerning the application for registration reaching Hetero, to our knowledge.

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It is unclear to the parties signing this letter why the MCC deems the generic product of sufficient quality for MSF to use, but has not yet fully registered the drug. Full registration of one or more quality generics would allow the National Department of Health to open a more competitive tender and obtain a more affordable linezolid product to address the huge public health impacts of the TB epidemic. It would allow clinicians across South Africa to have fewer concerns for cost when prescribing linezolid to DR-TB patients in need, in line with national guidelines. Most importantly, the availability of generic linezolid would help save DR-TB patients’ lives.

Clinicians across South Africa consistently struggle to offer adequate treatment regimens for patients with DR-TB. The current treatment course for DR-TB is at least two years, and patients sometimes take more than 20 pills per day and suffer painful injections for the first six months of treatment. The only medicines available can have devastating side effects—including deafness and psychosis—and the cost of a treatment regimen is significantly higher than that for standard, drug-sensitive TB.

World Health Organisation\(^3\) and national\(^4\) guidelines in South Africa recommend linezolid as a third-line drug for DR-TB treatment, when cost permits. These guidelines highlight the importance of linezolid in designing treatment regimens strong enough to combat extensively drug-resistant TB (XDR-TB) and pre-XDR TB. The drug is also one of few available options for patients who do not tolerate standard DR-TB therapies. We estimate that every year, at least 1,000 patients diagnosed with DR-TB in South Africa would be eligible candidates for a linezolid-containing regimen, if cost were not a prohibitive factor. For DR-TB patients, access to an adequate regimen means the difference between life and death.

Earlier this year, the sinister intentions of the multinational pharmaceutical industry to block access to generic medicines were made glaringly obvious. Documents leaked to the media revealed a US$600,000 plot by 25 multinational pharmaceutical companies to protect profit margins at the expense of public health, by delaying reform of South Africa’s patent laws through a covert campaign.\(^5\) In order to counter the corporate interests exposed during “Pharmagate,” strong leadership that promotes access to medicines and advances the constitutional right to access healthcare services in South Africa is required from state bodies like the MCC. Registration of generic linezolid would be a clear step forward in the right direction, and help address a disease and public health emergency that is the leading cause of death in South Africa. Further delays in registering a quality-approved generic are unconscionable.

We urge the MCC to register generic Hetero linezolid as a matter of urgency, or to provide urgent clarification on why registration is being delayed. We look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,

**Current and Former DR-TB Patients Who Have Benefitted from the Inclusion of Linezolid in their Treatment Regimens**

Phumeza Tisile—Khayelitsha, Western Cape  
Andaleeb Rinquest—Cape Town, Western Cape  
Morgan Scholtz—Kleinkranz, Western Cape  
Mary McNally—Cape Town, Western Cape

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5. http://keionline.org/node/1908
Organisations:

St.Lukes Hospice* (NPC)
Accredited to the Hospice Palliative Care Association

(Doctors Without Borders South Africa)

Clinicians and Care Providers

Priscilla Nelson
Chief Executive Officer
St Luke’s Hospice
Kenilworth

Tom Boyles
Division of Infectious Diseases and HIV Medicine
Department of Medicine
University of Cape Town

Dr Elizabeth Augustine
Kuyasa Clinic
Khayelitsha, City of Cape Town

Dr Beth Harley
Medical Officer: HIV/STI/TB,
City Health, Cape Town Municipality

Graeme Meintjes,
Infectious Diseases Specialist and Associate Professor of Medicine
University of Cape Town

Dr Natacha Berkowitz,
Medical Officer Khayelitsha Sub District
City of Cape Town

Dr. Helen Cox
Division of Medical Microbiology and Institute for Infectious Disease and Molecular Medicine
University of Cape Town

Dr R Greyling
TB/HIV CMO, Khayelitsha
Matthew Goniwe Clinic
City of Cape Town

Mark Nicol
Professor and Head, Division of Medical Microbiology,
University of Cape Town and National Health Laboratory Service

Rabia Cariem
Medical Officer,
City of Cape Town

Dr Melissa Budge
Groote Schuur Hospital
City of Cape Town

Dr Hannetjie Ferreira
Medical Officer
MDR/XDR TB Unit, Tshepong Hospital
Klerksdorp

Dr. Andrew Black
DR-TB Physician
Johannesburg
Dr Yolande Theron
Kheth’Impilo NGO

Anneke C. Hesseling
Professor in Paediatrics and Director: Paediatric TB Research Program
Desmond Tutu TB Centre
Department of Paediatrics and Child Health, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences,
Stellenbosch University

Professor H. Simon Schaaf
Professor in Paediatrics
Desmond Tutu TB Centre
Department of Paediatrics and Child Health, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences,
Stellenbosch University

Anthony Garcia-Prats
Paediatrician and Research Clinician
Desmond Tutu TB Centre
Department of Paediatrics and Child Health, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences,
Stellenbosch University

Keertan Dheda, MBBCh (Wits), FCP(SA), FCCP, PhD (Lond), FRCP (Lond)
Professor of Medicine
Director: Lung Infection and Immunity Unit;
Head: Division of Pulmonology
Department of Medicine
University of Cape Town, & Groote Schuur Hospital

Emma Carkeek
Medical Officer for City of Cape Town
Khayelitsha, Cape Town

Linda Aldum
Senior medical officer
Tygerberg\Northern

Daliwonga Siganga
Drug Resistant TB Professional Coordinator
Mitchell’s Plain Sub-District
Carol Cragg  
HAST medical Officer  
Khayelitsha/Eastern substructure  
Metro District Health Services  
Cape Town  

Raakhee Girran  
Senior medical officer  
City of Cape Town  

Dr Julian te Riele  
Clinical Manager  
Brooklyn Chest Hospital  

Dr John Black  
Infectious Diseases Department  
Livingstone Hospital  

Paul Willcox  
Emeritus Professor  
Department of Medicine  
University of Cape Town  

Dr. Nesri Padayatchi  
CAPRISA  

Dr David Stead  
Infectious diseases physician  
New Somerset Hospital  
Cape Town  

Rob Warren  
South African Medical Research Council  
Stellenbosch University  

Dr A Houston  
Michael Maphongwana CHC  
Khayelitsha, W. Cape  

Jason E. Farley, PhD, MPH, NP, FAAN
Associate Professor, Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing
Adjunct Associate Professor, University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN), South Africa
Adult Nurse Practitioner, JHU School of Medicine

Dr. M Biersteker
Medical Officer
Michael Maphongwana CHC

**Fort Grey TB Hospital (M/XDR TB Unit), Eastern Cape Dept. of Health**

Dr Lindelwa Cindi - Clinical Manager
Dr Oluwade Olaborede - Medical Officer
Dr Mfundiso Ntlola - Medical Officer
Dr Mzondeleli Mashicila - Medical Officer

**King Dinuzulu Hospital Complex (central MDR/XDR-TB hospital in KwaZulu Natal)**

Dr. K. Naidu
Dr. S. Chotoo
Dr. L. Pather
Dr. J. Maharaj
Dr. S. Nazeer
Dr. V.S. Challa
Dr. V.B. Sunkari
Dr. N. Singh
Dr. R. Czarnocki
Dr. D. Zitha
B.V Shezi (PN)
M.M Ngobese (EN)
Dr. S.B Maharaj
N. Misra (Pharmacist)
Z. Zondi (Pharmacist)
Dr. G.R Loganathan
M. Zulu (EN)
T. Shozi (PN)
Mavis Dlamini
W. Ngcobo
C. Zungu
B. Mthethwa
S.T Sithole
Dr. A.N Gwala
Dr. A.S Pala
Dr. S. Khalid
Dr. L.G Osburn
P.M. Radebe (PN)
S. Naidoo
G. Lutchmanan
M.C. Mkhize
J.L. Mhlongo
D.T. Khumalo
T.N. Mpanza
P.B. Mbanjwa
S.P. Mageba

**Doctors Without Borders South Africa, Eshowe Project, Kwa-Zulu Natal**

Mercy Munduru
Roderick R Embuido
Kyaw Soe Htet
Matthew Reid
Teresa Sebastiani
Vilaphi Bhengu

**Doctors Without Borders South Africa, Khayelitsha Project, Western Cape**

Dr. Vivian Cox
Dr. Jennifer Hughes
Dr. Aurelie Nelson
Dr. Jonathan Bernheimer
Lynne Wilkinson
Dr. Mary Ibeto
Vuyo Valkala
Leigh Snyman
Ruth Henwood
Gabriela Patten
Juliet Joubert
Iain Watermeier