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AIDS DRUG PROGRAMS DIRECTOR'S URGENT PLEA FOR DEEP DISCOUNTS FROM ROCHE

Directors of the AIDS Drug Assistance Program (ADAP) are meeting in Washington March 17-21 to negotiate with several pharmaceutical companies to demand larger discounts for AIDS therapies for their states. The directors most intense battle will be with Roche Pharmaceuticals of Nutley, New Jersey who is pricing their upcoming new drug, Fuzeon, at around $25,000 a year, the most expensive anti-HIV drug ever. Even with the discounts usually offered to ADAP there will not be enough funding to add this important life-saving drug to the formularies.

ADAP is a federal and state funded program that provides AIDS drugs for 90,000 people a month who are not covered, or are inadequately covered by insurance. The program has been seriously under-funded for the last three years due to growing formularies, increasing patient need and shrinking federal and state dollars. Some states' ADAPs already have waiting lists; others have had to place dangerous limits on the number of medications they cover. Demand for ADAP services is also expected to continue to rise in the coming months.

"In Texas we cannot responsibly add a drug the price of Fuzeon, it would simply swallow all of our budget, so the ball is in Roche's court to offer the best discount so that ADAP can offer all available treatment choices for people with AIDS, including Fuzeon." said Sue Gibson, from the Medication Advisory Committee to the Texas State Board of Health. The ADAP directors want discounts to make up for the 12% budget shortfall that exists in the current fiscal year.

AIDS activists throughout the nation have been frustrated over the growing financial debacle and have been pressing for more funding from the government and at the same time

demanding deeper discounts from the drug companies. The need to advocate for increased government funding, only to end up increasing profits for pharmaceutical giants, has activists angry over the financial debacle. Roche's drug is so cost-prohibitive that many ADAPs will be unable to include the medication on their formularies.

People with AIDS have been negotiating with Roche for months over the impending price of Fuzeon, up for FDA approval mid-March. But last month the company shocked the world with a preliminary wholesale price in Switzerland equal to $20,500 a year. "Pharmaceutical companies such as Roche should be held accountable for adding fuel to the fire to the demise of life saving AIDS drug assistance programs. This is clearly a public health disaster," said Cathy Olufs from AIDS Treatment Activist Coalition.

Olufs continued, "Those people with AIDS that don't have to rely on ADAP will get Fuzeon, others are left without options." Roche obviously feels that any price that the market will bear is acceptable no matter what financial constraints there are. Roche executive Franz B. Humer, chairman and chief executive recently said, "I know this is a difficult situation. I don't think $50 a day for a drug that initially will be used in those cases where patients have no other remedies is unreasonable."

This release provided by the Drug Development Committee of ATAC (AIDS Treatment Activist Coalition). We are a national coalition of AIDS activists, many living with HIV/AIDS, working together to end the AIDS epidemic by advancing research on HIV/AIDS.