State program to offer AIDS drugs

By PETER SHINKLE
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The Louisiana Health Care Authority will soon be offering eight drugs to people with the AIDS virus as part of an $18 million program the state has set up in response to the epidemic. The authority, which took control of the state's nine charity hospitals on Dec. 31, will offer the drugs through the hospitals beginning Monday, the authority said in a news release.

Prices for the drugs will be set according to a sliding scale, said Donna Williams, quality assurance manager for the state health department's AIDS out-patient program in New Orleans.

The state Department of Health and Hospitals currently offers one of the drugs, known commonly as AZT, to people with AIDS or who are infected with the AIDS virus who have income that is less than twice the federal poverty level.

Under the new program, the health care authority will take over responsibility for distribution of AZT, and will add seven other drugs to the list it is making available to people with AIDS or the AIDS virus across the state.

There is no known cure for AIDS, which destroys the immune system that protects the body from viruses and infections. The drugs to be offered include AZT and two others — Videx and Zovirax — that fight the spread within the body of the virus that causes the disease, Williams said.

Another drug, Interferon Alpha, strengthens the immune system, Williams said.

The other drugs to be offered help the body fight illnesses that strike the body after it is weakened by the AIDS virus, Williams said.

Three of the drugs prevent a form of pneumonia that often strikes people with AIDS, while another fights yeast infections that occur in the mouths of people with the disease, she said.

The cost of medicines for people with AIDS have long brought charges from AIDS activists that pharmaceutical companies and the federal Food and Drug Administration have been insensitive to the needs of people with AIDS.

It costs about $200 to treat one person with AZT for a month, according to Mark Dal Corso, medical director of the health department's

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AIDS Service Program in New Orleans.

“We’re glad, pleased and excited that this is happening,” said Sara Sims, executive director of Friends for Life-Capitol Area HIV/AIDS Services, a group that provides services to people with AIDS.

However, there are other diseases that commonly strike AIDS patients and that are not cured by the eight drugs to be offered under the new program, Sims said.

“We feel like (the program) needs to be expanded,” she said. For example, she said, the program should offer an antibiotic that fights toxoplasmosis, a parasite that strikes people with AIDS.

People with AIDS need help acquiring such drugs because the federal health insurance program Medicaid provides for drugs only if the patient is checked into a hospital, Sims said.

There have been 3,065 cases of AIDS reported in Louisiana, and nearly 2,000 of those people have died, according to health department data. East Baton Rouge Parish has had 252 cases reported, the data show.

A state task force estimated last January that 22,000 Louisianans were infected with the AIDS virus, although officials caution that figure is a rough estimate since there is no mandatory reporting of AIDS virus test results. More than 99 percent of people infected will eventually come down with full-blown AIDS and die, Dal Corso said.

But with the help of such drugs as AZT, Dal Corso said, people who get the disease are now expected to live about 16 months, considerably longer than the approximately seven months they were expected to live in the mid-1980s.

The drugs will be available at all nine of the Louisiana Health Care Authority medical centers. The state also is moving toward the creation of outpatient clinics at four hospitals for people with AIDS, who have often had to travel across the state to a New Orleans clinic for treatment.

The clinics will be at Earl K. Long Medical Center in Baton Rouge, University Medical Center in Lafayette, LSU Shreveport and Medical Center of Louisiana at New Orleans, according to a state plan.