

Well, here we are, and it's great to see this much support. It shows how big an issue Herceptin Funding really is, and to how many people, that so many of you have taken the time from your other commitments to make being here a priority. Thank you, greetings, Haere Mai, kia kaha, and well done to you all.

All we ask of you is that you treat this place with respect while you are here. Please don't leave litter or damage, please don't obstruct or impede anyone's entry or exit from the grounds, and remember we have all come here in peace. There is no place here for anyone who has NOT come in peace.

You probably know about PHARMAC – the government-driven entity that funds the drugs so many people in this country depend on for survival. What you also probably know is that despite huge public pressure, PHARMAC relentlessly refuses to acknowledge international empirical evidence that recommends 17 Herceptin treatments to women with early stage HER2+ breast cancer, for optimum chances of survival. Currently, and sadly, PHARMAC (and in essence the government) seems determined to stand by its decision to fund just three Herceptin treatments, on the evidence gleaned from a clinical trial involving less than 60 people. We're second only to Poland as being the worst country in the so-called civilized world for access to cancer drugs. It is very difficult for normal, intelligent people to understand how a government can so blatantly fail to be embarrassed by such a hideous statistic.

And where are they? Why has the Minister of Health declined the invitation to come out and speak to us about our concerns regarding the health of those he and his cabinet is supposed to be protecting? He is very conspicuous by his absence, our Health Minister! If this government could face us, he would be out here. Why can't he face us? Is he too embarrassed to speak to us? Is he too afraid? Or does he just not care? Whatever the reason, or the excuse, why would you want vote back into power a government who appears to have no backbone for public challenge, who chooses to hide behind the door, or be conveniently indisposed, or who doesn't care enough to want to come out here, and chooses instead to simply ignore its people, who are here today, asking it to be accountable for its decisions? Why would you sign up for another three years of this? How many women will die from curable breast cancer in that three years? The answer is, hundreds! Try and imagine even ONE hundred women in one place. Then try and imagine the scale of their connections with friends and family. How many children, husbands, fathers, mothers, sons, brothers, sisters and friends will have permanent, irreparable holes torn out of their lives?

Is this what you want?

PHARMAC is telling everyone that it's funding nine weeks of Herceptin treatment. That sounds generous, doesn't it? Nine weeks of free treatment for cancer! Well, the reality is that Herceptin is taken by its recipients, on average, once every three weeks, so it's three treatments! Forget nine weeks. Numbers are deceiving, and we shouldn't allow ourselves to be manipulated or seduced by them. Let's just strip away the niceties here and call this what it is – three treatments – less than twenty percent of the internationally recognised and recommended course for optimal chances of survival. Dressing up this unacceptable compromise as more substantial than what it really is, is an insult to the men, women and children of New Zealand who stand to have their lives systematically ripped apart by HER2+ breast cancer.

I'm an academic, and I know about research. I know what can be inferred or implied from it, and I also know what should in no way be taken as gospel from it, particularly if the sample is tiny. I also know that if results from a small sample are encouraging, the research needs to be replicated on a bigger scale to support or refute its initial findings before it should ever be adopted as true. Few scientists worth their salt would fly in the face of scientific caution and uphold a miniscule scrap of evidence as valid, against overwhelming evidence suggesting otherwise and use it to gamble with people's lives. So why does the government do it? How many people do you know that would willingly put themselves and their families through a whole hideous year of seventeen Herceptin treatments if research upholding three was in any way convincing, to anyone other than the holder of the purse strings governing expensive clinical treatments? Its all about money. You don't have to be an academic to understand that.

Admittedly, at anything between \$70,000 and \$120,000 per patient, Herceptin doesn't come cheap, but New Zealand women deserve a better message than the one they are currently getting – that the level of treatment available to prolong their lives costs more than they are worth. This government has made a conscious choice to abdicate one of the responsibilities its voting public put it in place to handle, namely preserving its citizens' health. Surely, that means providing access to the best possible treatment available in the face of a life-threatening disease? Apparently, yes, but only if its cheap. Nobody is arguing the fact that Herceptin is expensive, although the reasons remain hard to fathom why ANY drug that prolongs life should be labelled as cost prohibitive. How can health come second to ANYTHING else? The government has a choice. It can keep ploughing millions into advertising campaigns, under-floor heating in prisons, bankrolling illegal immigrants through the criminal justice system, and all manner of other things with public money. Or, it can step up to the internationally recognised benchmark, stop insulting its own people - the citizens whose best interests it won an election purporting to uphold - and do whatever is possible to preserve their health. At the moment, while we're standing here, our government has picked its priorities and bounced the burden of funding Herceptin back to the public.

This is not good enough.

2008 is an election year. Herceptin funding is now an election issue. I've voted labour all my life, like generations of my family have, and I used to believe it cared about Mr and Mrs Average. I'm not sure exactly when the reversal occurred and it started throwing them to the wolves instead, but I do know that without a u-turn on this issue, Labour will never again get my vote, not when it relegates its HER2+ women to the scrap heap because the cost of doing otherwise is apparently too high. Not when it then goes on to plough millions into high-profile, international advertising campaigns to try and convince the world how great this country is, and then sits there before its people, openly dithering about how to spend a multi-million dollar surplus.

On behalf of the people of New Zealand, very many of whom have had or will have their lives torn apart by HER2+ breast cancer, I am formally asking this government to do the decent thing. Come on, labour! You are formally being called upon to step up to the international benchmark, act humanely, stop ignoring the voice of your own people, leave the job of playing God to God Himself, and fund the full course of Herceptin.