



Drugs firms investigated



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Cars are sold, houses are put on the market and medical aids are drained as cancer patients try to afford life-saving treatment and this has prompted the Competition Commission to investigate alleged price-fixing by large pharmaceutical companies.

The commission said in Pretoria yesterday that probes had begun against Roche Holdings AG, Aspen Pharmacare Holdings Ltd and Pfizer Inc for exorbitant pricing of life-saving cancer medication. Commissioner Tembinkosi Bonakele, pictured, said it was believed that Roche and its US-based biotechnology company, Genentech, have excessively priced breast cancer medicine.

Trastuzuman, a Roche brand sold as Herceptin and Herclon, is recommended by the World Health Organisation to treat breast and stomach cancer in SA, but many medical aids refuse to pay for the treatment which can come to R500 000 or more for a 12-month course, Bonakele said.

The commission also suspects Roche could be using the “ever-greening” strategy to delay or prevent entry of generic alternative breast cancer drugs.

Pfizer Inc would also be probed for suspected price-fixing of lung cancer drug, Xalkori crizotinib, while Aspen is being investigated for excessive costs of various cancer medications. “Aspen is alleged to have attempted to sell cancer medicines in Europe for up to 40 times their previous prices,” the commissioner said.

Cancer Association of SA’s Professor Michael Herbst said about 100 000 people are diagnosed with cancer each year and many sell their assets or apply for a second bond to afford treatment.