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On edge as drug runs dry

HEALTH
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A GOLD Coast man who has the same cancer that killed Apple founder Steve Jobs may not be able to continue lifesaving treatment in Brisbane because of a medical supply shortage.

Richard Johnston, 49, of Reedy Creek, has suffered the rare form of cancer - neuroendocrine tumours - for 13 years but only began treatment this year.

The father of two is among several Queenslanders listed for peptide receptor radionuclide therapy at Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital, the only site in Queensland where it is available and one of only a few in Australia.

But the hospital has had to stop treatment because of a Queensland shortage of an amino acid, leaving patients in limbo until the issue is resolved by the manufacturer.

Patients are given the amino acid before treatments to protect their kidneys. Treatment is still available in Melbourne, Western Australia and Sydney.

Queensland patients can travel interstate, but would have to pay \$35,000 for treatment as it is only available for free in the state where a patient lives.



Steve Jobs

Mr Johnston started treatment in May, receiving four courses before supply stopped.

He will undergo tests next month to find out if he has to have more treatment.

Previously living on painkillers day-to-day, Mr Johnston said he felt the best he had in more than a decade and cannot understand why treatment is not readily available for everyone with his condition.

"I feel fantastic for the first time in 10 years," Mr Johnston said.

"This treatment should be available all the time."

Royal Brisbane's executive director Dr David Alcorn said the issue was outside of the hospital's control. "We will be in a position to recommence this super-specialist treatment when we can identify a reliable supply of the amino acid," he said.

The hospital has treated 22 people over the past three years at a cost of about \$35,000 a patient.

Unicorn Foundation president Dr John Leyden said the treatment system in Australia was flawed.

"This is not fair - they're killing patients by withholding the treatment," Dr Leyden said.



**Cancer patient Richard Johnston says the treatment left him feeling the best he had in years.
Photo:
GLENN HAMPSON**