



Media release

17 July 2009

Nuclear medicine experts respond to global supply crisis

Agreement has been reached between Australia's main medical isotopes provider, ANSTO*, and Australian nuclear medicine community leaders to help combat the world nuclear medicine supply shortage by working side by side to secure reliable supply for Australian patients. The group includes representatives from nuclear medicine clinicians, radiopharmacies, regulators and ANSTO.

At a meeting on Tuesday 14 July, the working party considered the critical global shortage of essential medical isotopes precipitated by the Canadian Chalk River reactor shutdown. It was revealed last week it will remain closed until the end of 2009. Chalk River supplied about 40 per cent of the world's medical isotopes. It was shutdown in May due to an internal heavy water leak.

The group agreed to work together to meet the medical requirements for Australian patients. Ways to improve supply efficiencies and how Australia can make efforts in helping to alleviate the global shortage were reviewed. One way will be for all product not required for Australian patients being made available to global users.

ANSTO also said it would take the lead to consider ways in which to optimise production and distribution of the key medical isotope— molybdenum-99.

Regular meetings of the working party are planned to consider proposals, provide ongoing reviews of the situation and finalise improvement initiatives.

The global shortage will be made more intense Saturday when another major reactor at Petten, Holland, is shutdown for maintenance for one month. The Dutch reactor supplies about 30 per cent of the world's isotopes. There are also plans to close this reactor for long term maintenance in the first half of 2010.

This unprecedented shortage is placing pressure on producing countries to cater for isotopes supply needs equitably. This includes countries such as South Africa which currently meets Australia's needs for molybdenum-99 which is made available through generators produced at ANSTO.

Australia's OPAL research reactor has a very substantial capacity to irradiate plates to produce molybdenum-99. ANSTO's capacity is governed by a separate new molybdenum-99 manufacturing plant that is primarily designed for Australia's domestic needs. Whilst working closely with its safety regulator for a full production licence, anticipated in coming weeks, ANSTO is also working hard to assess all options to contribute to the global nuclear medicine supply network.

Despite a relatively favourable position in the face of the current crisis, Australia is vulnerable if the global crisis worsens due among other factors to OPAL's monthly fuel change shutdowns necessitating periodic importation of medical isotopes.

For more information please contact:

Andrew Humpherson, GM Government & Public Affairs 0419 241 587

* Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation – Australia's centre of nuclear expertise