An application was submitted for aldosterone antagonists to be added as a therapeutic class (with spironolactone as the representative) to Section 12.4 of the EML. Spironolactone has been in the EML since 1983 as a potassium-sparing diuretic. Three clinical trials were presented as evidence for efficacy in the application. The first was the Randomized Aldactone Evaluation Study (RALES, 1999), which demonstrated a significant benefit with the addition of spironolactone to the standard therapy of an angiotensin-converting-enzyme (ACE) inhibitor and a loop diuretic in patients with severe heart failure. This randomized, double-blinded, placebo-controlled trial assessed the efficacy of spironolactone (25 mg) in 1663 patients in 195 centres in 15 countries. Patients included in the trial had New York Heart Association (NYHA) class IV heart failure within the previous six months, NYHA class III or IV heart failure at the time of enrolment, and a left ventricular ejection fraction (LVEF) of no more than 35%. The trial was stopped early after a mean follow-up period of 24 months due to an interim analysis showing that spironolactone was superior to placebo. The trial found a 30% reduction in overall mortality (hazard ratio, HR = 0.70, 95% CI: 0.60–0.82), a 35% reduction in hospitalization (HR = 0.65, 95% CI: 0.54–0.77), and significant improvement in heart failure symptoms based on the NYHA functional class (P < 0.001) in the treatment group. The number needed to treat (NNT) to prevent one death over 24 months was 8.8 (1). The second clinical trial was the Eplerenone Post-Acute Myocardial Infarction Heart Failure Efficacy and Survival Study (EPHESUS), which evaluated the effectiveness of eplerenone (25 mg initial dose, titrated to a maximum of 50 mg) in patients with post-myocardial infarction left ventricular systolic dysfunction (LVEF ≤ 40%) in a randomized, double-blinded, placebo-controlled trial. Eplerenone reduced overall mortality by 15% (HR = 0.85, 95% CI: 0.75–0.96) and cardiovascular disease-specific mortality by 17% (HR = 0.83, 95% CI: 0.72–0.94) when compared with placebo over a mean follow-up of 16 months (2). The third trial was the Eplerenone in Mild Patients Hospitalization and Survival Study in Heart Failure (EMPHASIS-HF), a randomized, double-blinded, placebo-controlled study that also showed that eplerenone was effective in patients with left ventricular systolic dysfunction (EF < 35%) and mild symptoms (NYHA class II). The trial was also stopped early because of a significant decrease in deaths from cardiovascular causes (HR = 0.76, 95% CI: 0.61–0.94) and a decrease in hospitalization from heart failure (HR = 0.58, 95% CI: 0.47–0.70) in the eplerenone treatment group (3). Spironolactone is
associated with an increased risk of gynaecomastia, which may not be as frequent with eplerenone. However, both are associated with an increased risk of hyperkalaemia, which may be more frequent with eplerenone whereas gynaecomastia was more frequent with the older aldosterone antagonists (4). Other systematic reviews have confirmed the decrease in mortality with aldosterone antagonists (5). There are no direct comparative studies of spironolactone and eplerenone. Spironolactone is widely available and inexpensive. Eplerenone is substantially more expensive. Several cost–effectiveness studies from high-income countries show that spironolactone, compared with placebo as an add-on therapy in heart failure patients already treated with ACE-inhibitors and beta-blockers, is cost effective under most assumptions. The Heart Failure Society of America Guidelines Committee recommends: “Until such time as the effectiveness of these two drugs (spironolactone and eplerenone) in several different patient groups is compared in a well-designed clinical trial, it seems most reasonable for the clinical use of these agents to be consistent with their use in clinical trials. If cost or insurance reimbursement is an issue, as it will be for many, a reasonable choice is to substitute spironolactone" (6).

The most recent systematic review concluded that eplerenone was similar to older, less expensive aldosterone antagonists, but hyperkalaemia may be more frequent with eplerenone whereas gynaecomastia was more frequent with the older aldosterone antagonists (4). Other systematic reviews have confirmed the decrease in mortality with aldosterone antagonists (5).

There are no direct comparative studies of spironolactone and eplerenone. Spironolactone is widely available and inexpensive. Eplerenone is substantially more expensive. Several cost–effectiveness studies from high-income countries show that spironolactone, compared with placebo as an add-on therapy in heart failure patients already treated with ACE-inhibitors and beta-blockers, is cost effective under most assumptions. The Heart Failure Society of America Guidelines Committee recommends: “Until such time as the effectiveness of these two drugs (spironolactone and eplerenone) in several different patient groups is compared in a well-designed clinical trial, it seems most reasonable for the clinical use of these agents to be consistent with their use in clinical trials. If cost or insurance reimbursement is an issue, as it will be for many, a reasonable choice is to substitute spironolactone" (6).

References: