

Prescribing

Introduction

A prescription can only be written by a Medical Practitioner who is registered with the GMC. Prescription charges were first introduced in 1952 and were at that time 1 shilling (the equivalent of 5p today) but are currently £7.65 per item. It is possible to buy a Prescription Payment Certificate (PPC) if you are expecting to need several items:

- A three month certificate costs £29.10 so if you will need four or more items in the three months you will save money.
- A twelve month certificate costs £104.00 giving a saving if you need more than 14 items in the twelve months.

Check out <http://www.nhs.uk/NHSEngland/Healthcosts/Pages/PPC.aspx> for more information.

Exemptions

Many people are exempt from prescription charges:

- Men and women aged 60 and over.
- Children and young people up to the age of 16; and up to the age of 18 if they are in full-time education.
- Pregnant women and up to 12 months after the birth of the baby – a valid medical exemption certificate is required.
- Some specified medical conditions such as epilepsy, diabetes (unless treatment is diet only) or a permanent fistula such as a colostomy. These conditions tend to be ones that have historically been exempt from charges but reviews are undertaken and changes made. Patients with cancer, for example, are now exempt from prescription charges during active treatment but lose that exemption once the cancer is cured. This exemption was introduced in 2009.
- People with a permanent physical disability (with a valid exemption certificate).
- Anyone holding a valid war pension certificate if the prescription is for the accepted disability.
- An inpatient in an NHS hospital.

In addition:

- Women are entitled to free contraception prescriptions from the GP / STD clinics.
- People who hold an NHS tax credit exemption certificate or a valid HC2 certificate or receive certain specified allowances are entitled to free prescriptions.

Check out <http://www.nhs.uk/NHSEngland/Healthcosts/Pages/Prescriptioncosts.aspx> for more information.

Prescriptions – Some Facts and Figures

- Approximately 90% of dispensed items are free of charge; most of these are prescribed to people over the age of 60.
- In Oxfordshire 44% of the population is either over 60 or under 16 and hence exempt from prescription charges.
- In our Practice the GPs collectively write approximately 200 prescriptions a day although most of these are repeat prescriptions.
- If a patient is on continuing treatment the national policy is to prescribe one month's supply at a time but our Practice will often prescribe enough for two months as it saves time and repeat visits to the Doctor.
- Contraception is usually supplied for six months at a time. If a new treatment is being prescribed, a lower quantity may be prescribed initially to ensure suitability etc.
- If a patient is on regular treatment for a long period of time and the medical condition is stable the GP may set up repeat dispensing. This allows the patient to collect two months' supply at a time for either six or twelve months without the requirement to make an appointment with the Doctor or request a repeat prescription. In order to remain on this system the patient must attend a review appointment before a new repeat dispensing prescription is issued in order to monitor the effectiveness of the treatment and to discuss any changes.
- Sometimes it is cheaper to buy the prescribed item over the counter than pay the prescription charge. The pharmacist will usually advise if this is the case.
- It is possible to ask for a private prescription for medication or treatment that is not available on the NHS.
- GPs tend to prescribe generic drugs. These are generally cheaper than branded products and just as effective. On the whole it is unlikely that a patient will experience any change in the effectiveness of one company's drug over another's so the pharmacist will order from the company which offers the best price providing quality is not compromised. However, as a branded drug is obviously more predictable than one made by several different companies due to the consistency of its manufacture, a GP may prescribe a branded drug for some conditions where even a slight variation in the drug could affect its action; for example in the treatment of epilepsy.

Budgetary Issues

GPs are monitored to check on what they prescribe and how much they spend. The annual drug budget for our Practice for 2011/2012 was £846,000.

The budget is allocated according to a weighting system known as ASTRO-PU. Each Practice is weighted according to the composition of its population in terms of Age, Sex and Temporary Residents.

In basic terms, each category generates a different number of Prescribing Units and these are then used to determine the budget allocation. This allows for comparisons to be made between Practices as patient populations can obviously differ greatly, but like-weighted Practices should spend at the same approximate level.

Area	Average cost per ASTRO-PUT (£)
Nationally	6.64
South-East England	5.26
Oxfordshire	5.46
Our Practice	5.11

The Practice receives month-on-month figures which detail its overall spending and spending on individual categories of treatment and then sets targets for future spending.

The overall budget for Oxfordshire is the third lowest in the country - as allocation takes account of issues such as deprivation – but there is always pressure to make cuts and hence there may be some difficult decisions to be made.

Special Circumstances

Our Practice is one of ten practices forming the South-East locality of the Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group which is currently considering proposals to stop (or perhaps restrict) the NHS prescribing of gluten-free products which cost the Oxford Primary Care Trust £350,000.00 a year. If introduced it will mean that Oxfordshire GP's will be advised not to prescribe (or restrict) gluten free products to patients with celiac disease.

This will be a local, not national, policy and may put GP's into a difficult position with patients as well as introduce a 'post code lottery' for the NHS provision of gluten free products since GP's practicing in neighbouring counties may not be subject to such advice.

In situations such as a Swine 'Flu vaccination programme the cost of the treatment is absorbed nationally but the cost of administering the treatment is paid for by the individual Practices.

New / Expensive Drugs

A Doctor will not refuse to prescribe a new drug just because it is more expensive but will weigh up the evidence available from clinical trials and reports and consider each case on an individual basis in consultation with the patient.

If you take an inhaler, for example, some can cost up to £60.00 each so it is only sensible to try a cheaper alternative first as it may be just as effective.

Our Practice holds a clinical meeting every three weeks to look at the evidence available both from national data and its own patients. From this the Doctors can monitor the effectiveness of different treatments and use this to guide future prescribing.