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NHS prescription charges and exemption arrangements In Scotland Consultation

Please find attached our response to be considered by the Executive's Health Department.
If you require any additional information please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Chris White'. Below the signature is a short, horizontal, slightly wavy line.

Chris White, Benefits Officer
Policy and Information Department

SAMH Response to Consultation

NHS Prescription Charges And Exemption Arrangements In Scotland

SAMH

The Scottish Association for Mental Health is the leading voluntary sector organisation in its field in Scotland providing accommodation, support, training, employment and structured day services for people with mental health and related problems including homelessness, addictions and other forms of social exclusion. In addition, we operate an information service, offering general mental health information and specialist legal and benefits advice. SAMH campaigns on a wide range of mental health issues, and works to challenge the stigma and discrimination experienced by people who live with mental health problems, influence policy and improve care services in Scotland.

INTRODUCTION

SAMH has long argued that the current system of charging and exemptions is outdated, complicated and unfair, particularly for those with mental health problems. We agree that there is a pressing need to modernise prescription charges and exemption arrangements in Scotland.

In 1996, we published 'A Tax on Mental Health' arguing that prescription charging was an unfair tax on mental illness. In October that year, Jeremy Bray MP laid down an early day motion (EDM) at Westminster calling for an exemption from charges for those with serious mental illness. This EDM was signed by 152 MPs including 31 Scottish MPs.

We believe that the limited number of long-term conditions currently exempt from prescription charges create unfairness in the system.

However, we would welcome the introduction of exemptions for people treated under the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003 that may be compelled to take medication under the conditions set by a Community Treatment Order.

EXEMPTIONS RELATED TO MEDICAL CONDITIONS

In Scotland, the medical exemption arrangements are condition-based and a limited number of long-term conditions are exempt from prescription charges. SAMH believes this is particularly unfair. Conditions such as epilepsy and some forms of diabetes are currently exempt while other equally debilitating conditions are not covered by exemptions, including illnesses like cancer, asthma and severe and enduring mental health problems.

Extending the exemption list would need regular review in order to be fair and effective, but continuing this system would still leave out many conditions where there may be strong arguments for an exemption.

We would however welcome the introduction of exemptions for people treated under the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003. Many people subject to Community Treatment Orders (CTOs) will be covered by existing exemptions, but some people subject to CTOs may not be exempt. It would be incredibly unjust if people subject to a CTO had to pay for medication that they were compelled to take, and where there are legal and personal consequences if they do not comply.

People with mental health problems are frequently prescribed more than one medication to treat different symptoms, or to counter side-effects of other medications. As prescriptions are charged on a per item basis this means that the cost of prescribed treatment may be higher for someone with a mental health problem, particularly as they may also develop other general health problems. Therefore we would welcome the introduction of a high prescription user category, particularly where people receive multiple treatments, or medications used to treat side effects of other medications.

ECONOMIC NEED – AFFORDABILITY

The price of prescription charges falls disproportionately on people with chronic long-term health problems who are likely to require regular prescriptions. In Scotland, people with mental health problems are more likely to live in poverty and experience poorer health than the general population¹.

Incapacity Benefit

Incapacity Benefit claimants are treated particularly unfairly under the current charging system. Claimants who only receive Incapacity Benefit do not qualify for free prescriptions but people in similar circumstances receiving higher levels of benefit income are exempt from prescription charges. For example:

A single person aged 35 and unable to work because of ill health entitled to Incapacity Benefit has an income of £86.75 per week and is not entitled to free prescriptions. If the same person was to receive the middle rate care component of Disability Living Allowance they would become entitled to Income Support and see their income rise to £170.35 and receive free prescriptions.

Currently people receiving Income Support or Pension Credit are exempt from prescription charges. We believe that this should be extended to include people in receipt of Incapacity Benefit.

NHS Low Income Scheme

In 2004-05, over 70,400 people in Scotland applied for help under the NHS Low Income Scheme. As the consultation document highlights, over 41,200 received full help and 21,500 qualified for partial help (HC3). The HC3 entitles the holder to help with medical charges but this does not extend to prescription charges.

¹ Scottish Executive 2004 Constituency Health and Well Being Profiles

Pre- Payment Certificates (PPC)

The pre-payment scheme is available to help people on low-income budget for prescriptions but anecdotal evidence suggests that people with mental health problems are not benefiting from this scheme. PPC's cost £33.90 for four months or £93.20 per year, a substantial lump sum for people on a low income. In Wales the costs of a PPC in 2005 was reduced to £20.93 (for four months) and £57.46 (for twelve months) and the Welsh Assembly has agreed to abolish prescription charges in 2007.

In 2001 the Citizen's Advice Bureaux report 'Unhealthy Charges' found that 50% of clients who had paid prescription charges reported difficulties in affording the charge and 28% of people who were not entitled to free prescriptions failed to redeem all or part of their prescription due to the cost. The report also highlighted that 'people with mental health problems were faced with living below the poverty line or not getting prescriptions dispensed for medication which was essential to their ability to cope in the community'.²

We would welcome the introduction of easier more accessible pre-payment methods, including the ability to pay by instalments to reduce the upfront costs of prescriptions.

Many people in Scotland currently make use of PayPoint plastic cards to manage their finances. PayPoint cards can be used to make payments to utility bills and council tax bills easily at local shops and post offices. Currently the PPC scheme does not allow for the payment by instalments, but using PayPoint or a similar system could address some of the financial barriers low-income households face with the current pre-payment arrangements.

CAPPING PRESCRIPTION CHARGES

We agree that the introduction of a monthly charge cap with the limit set in line with the current cost of a PPC could reduce some of the financial barriers and inequality in the current system for high prescription users. The current monthly PPC rate is around £8 per month and the current prescription charge is £6.65 per item. A cap would mean that if a person required more than one prescription per month there would be a maximum charge of £8 per month in line with current PPC rates.

FULL TIME EDUCATION OR TRAINING

Currently only people aged 16-18 inclusive are exempt from prescription charges. Students in full time tertiary education or undergraduate courses do not fall into this category. Although they may be eligible to an exemption on income grounds this can be overly bureaucratic requiring repeated claims to cover the length of the course. Entering education can often be a positive move towards recovery for people with mental health problems and we would welcome the extension of this exemption to all people in full time education or training.

² Unhealthy Charges: CAB evidence on the impact of health charges, NACAB 2001

CONCLUSION

Modernising prescription charges in Scotland could reduce health inequalities by removing one of the barriers to people seeking help at an early stage. A fairer, more affordable system of prescription charges would help alleviate the financial pressures on people with mental health problems who are likely to receive low incomes, and could have a positive impact on their mental health. Modernisation of the current system would benefit Scotland's population generally and those with mental health problems in particular.

In summary, the changes that SAMH would support are:

- Exemptions for people treated under the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003
- Exemptions for people in receipt of Incapacity Benefit
- The extension of HC3's to include prescription charges
- Easier more accessible pre-payment methods, including the ability to pay by instalments to reduce the upfront costs of prescriptions
- The introduction of a monthly prescription charge cap
- Exemptions extended to all people in full time education or training.

27th April 2006

RESPONDEE INFORMATION FORM

Please complete the details below and attach to your response. This will ensure we handle your response appropriately:

Name: Scottish Association for Mental Health
Address: Cumberae House, 15 Carlton Court, Glasgow G5 9JP
Consultation title: NHS Prescription Charges And Exemption Arrangements In Scotland

1. Are you responding as: (please tick one box) * Required

- (a) on individual (go to Q2a/b and then Q4)
(b) on behalf of a group or organisation (go to Q3 and then Q4)

2a. **Individuals:**

Do you agree to your response being made available to the public (in Scottish Executive library and/or on the Scottish Executive website)?

- Yes (go to 2b below)
 No, not at all

2b. **Where confidentiality is not requested**, we will make your response available to the public on the following basis (**please tick one** of the following boxes)

- Yes, make my response, name and address all available
 Yes, make my response available, but not my name or address
 Yes, make my response and name available, but not my address

2c. **ON BEHALF OF GROUPS OR ORGANISATIONS**

The name and address of your organisation **will be** made available to the public (in the Scottish Executive library and/or on the Scottish Executive website). Are you also content for your **response** to be made available?

- Yes
 No We will treat your response as confidential

3. We will share your response internally with other Scottish Executive policy teams who may be addressing the issues you discuss. They may wish to contact you again in the future, but we require your permission to do so. Are you content for the Scottish Executive to contact you again in the future in relation to this consultation response?

- Yes
 No