

Review of NHS Prescription Charges and Exemption Arrangements in Scotland

I am an independent community pharmacist with three shops serving a variety of populations. At these pharmacies I work with a wide range of patients particularly students, the elderly and those in other low income groups. I am regularly informed of patients' thoughts about prescription charges and agree with the majority of them that the current system is grossly unfair. I disagree with the Scottish Socialist Party's view that they should be abolished altogether however and so welcome this consultation as a sensible way forward.

The review of NHS prescription charges is a complex one and I would not like to suggest any solutions but think my experience at the front line may be useful to suggest a set of key principles to consider during the review. These are listed below.

- Charges should not be abolished as they help to place a value on medicines. This is particularly relevant considering the massive amounts of returned medicines from patients disposed of through pharmacies every day.
- Charges bring extra money that is desperately needed into the NHS.
- Charges, for the vast majority of patients who have to pay under the current system, do not prevent treatment. Patients deciding not to purchase a medicine because of the prescription charge are an extremely rare occurrence. That this happens at all is still unacceptable however so attention needs to focus on the ability to pay or the level of charge itself.
- Prescription prepayment certificates are available meaning nobody has to pay more than £1.80 per week for prescriptions. The only difficulty with this system is that patients must pay up front.
- The current system of exemption due to medical conditions is extremely unfair and must be removed. It does not take account of the volume of medicines required and it is not fair that a wealthy individual with a medical exemption should be exempt when another patient just missing out on income based exemption would be forced to pay. It is also not fair that currently a medical exemption extends to all of the patient's medicines, not just the condition for which they are exempt.
- NHS charges are crucial to many smaller pharmacies as a contribution to cash flow. Consideration must be given to the implications for pharmacies if changes to the prescription charge system are introduced.
- Whatever system is adopted in future should be purely based on ability to pay. Children under 16 must be exempt as they cannot work. After that age should not allow exemption. There are many wealthy patients who can afford to pay in all age groups and with all medical conditions.

I hope these points prove useful in considering this review and I would be happy to discuss further any issues that I have mentioned. A review of prescription charges is well over due and I look forward to explaining a much fairer system to my patients in future.

Yours truly,

Michael Embrey MRPharmS