

Give women the choice

This week the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency organised a seminar to raise the possibility that some medicines for women — including the contraceptive pill — should be available to purchase over the counter (p153). There will be a predictable negative response from certain groups within the medical profession to such a switch. The concerns will be that pharmacists will be not be aware of those women at risk of complications either because of existing medical conditions or other medicines they are taking. Access to medical records could put that right at a stroke — but that is another story.

Whether she is working or looking after children, barely a week will go by without a woman needing or wanting to visit a pharmacy. The convenience of being able to add the contraceptive pill to her basket would be immeasurable, especially since, because she is not ill, she may resent having to make an appointment to see her GP. But if price is a deterrent, as it may be for some women, the option of going to the GP will remain. However, we suspect some busy women will probably be prepared to pay to save time.

Although making the contraceptive pill a P-medicine will be a complicated process, it could result in a win:win:win situation — a win for women, a win for GPs and the health service because it shifts the purchase to those women who are prepared to pay, and a win for pharmacists because it will add a string to their clinical bows.

It will be many months, if not years, before this becomes a reality but pharmacists should at least be encouraged to think about the implications. From the standpoint of healthy women eager to take responsibility for themselves, it should be pursued.

Let patients decide who sees their records

Community pharmacists in Britain must think, on a daily basis, how much more effective they would be if they could see patients' medical records. Many GPs and patients, however, are concerned about confidentiality if any Thomas, Richard or Henrietta may take a look.

This week we report on a web-based medical record system — about to be extended to cover about 100 practices — in which patients decide who sees their records (p160). Like the system used for accessing bank details and to make transactions online, which is about as secure as any electronic system available, the medical records are protected, outside the GP's surgery, by a password that only the patient knows.

In this way, patients decide who sees their records and in what circumstances — just what pharmacy requires.

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