

Spending on medicines: how guidance and promotion drive cost increases

The Department of Health has released a detailed breakdown of where the £6.1bn worth of medicines dispensed in the community went last year. Jonathan Buisson looks at some of the influences at work, particularly National Service Frameworks

A BILLION here, a billion there and soon you are talking real money, an American Senator once said. Never was this truer than when looking at the Department of Health's detailed prescription statistics (www.doh.gov.uk/prescriptionstatistics/index.htm). With over 587 million individual prescription items dispensed in England, the 500 pages of the latest statistical bulletin reveal a number of interesting trends.

The top 10 "best selling" entities account for almost one-fifth of the £6.1bn spend between them (Table 1). The chart is dominated by categories of medicines that have not been far from the attentions of the professional and lay media, the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, and the marketing departments of the pharmaceutical industry over the past year — statins, proton pump inhibitors (PPIs), selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and antihypertensives.

Statins in particular have shown spectacular increases in sales during 2001. An additional 1.2 million prescriptions written for simvastatin (Zocor) increased the cost to the NHS by almost £40m, lifting it to first place in the table. Atorvastatin (Lipitor) has also been popular, with an extra 1.5 million prescriptions increasing its cost to the NHS by about 50 per cent to £152m.

Dr Brian Curwain, chief pharmacist at New Forest Primary Care Trust, says that atorvastatin was given a particular boost following the withdrawal of cerivastatin (Lipobay) in the middle of last year. "Most of the cerivastatin prescribing was converted to atorvastatin," he says.

The National Service Framework for Coronary Heart Disease recommends the use of statins to lower cholesterol levels and this is backed by a number of large clinical trials.

"Where there is clear guidance from NICE or an NSF which gives specific advice, then that is the biggest driver for prescribing," Andrew Brown, pharmaceuti-



Does the National Health Service get the best value for the £6.1bn it spends on medicines?

cal adviser to Mendip Primary Care Trust, says.

Dr Curwain supports this opinion. "There is a sort of view in the NHS that prescribing budgets aren't real, but primary care trusts know that they will be audited on their compliance with the NSFs."

CARDIAC PRESCRIBING

Cardiac prescribing is on the increase, Mr Brown says, as primary care trusts try to meet the guidance in the NSF for CHD. "It has been realised that if you treat hypertension aggressively you can save lives. Most patients receive multiple treatments."

This is reflected in the Department's figures. Cardiovascular products (falling within chapter 2 of the British National Formulary) account for around one-fifth of all medicines' costs with a total of £1,464m spent on them last year.

"The inclusion of amlodipine and, particularly, doxazosin in the top 10 is interesting," Dr Curwain says. "Both have been

sold well to prescribers. As far as I am concerned, doxazosin is a drug of last resort in hypertension, but its inclusion at number eight on the list prompts one to ask: 'What value is the NHS getting from doxazosin?' Ranking medicines by total spend obscures the low-cost items such as atenolol for which there is a lot of prescribing, but it does highlight whether the NHS is getting the best value for the money it spends."

The influence of pharmaceutical promotion can also be detected in the figures. With the recent launch of Nexium (esomeprazole), AstraZeneca has switched its promotional support away from Losec (omeprazole). As a result, the number of prescriptions written for omeprazole fell during 2001. Omeprazole recently came off patent and the first generic version was launched in the United Kingdom this week (see p531). This will lead to a rapid fall in the cost to the NHS of this medicine and it is likely to fall out of the top 10 next year.

One area in which there has not recently been a lot of guidance is respiratory medicine. The most costly item in this category is salmeterol (Serevent) with a net ingredient cost of £84.7m in 2001. Of this, £66.2m was spent on the 120-dose 25µg inhaler. More money was spent on four different salmeterol preparations than on the 42 different preparations of salbutamol that were available and which cost £78.8m in total.

Mr Brown says that new guidance expected shortly from the British Thoracic Society on prescribing in asthma may lead pharmaceutical and prescribing advisers to look more closely at this area. Dr Curwain says that Serevent has been heavily promoted to the organisers of respiratory clinics and the area clearly needs attention.

Guidance was issued this week by NICE on the choice of asthma inhalers for children (see p524).

At the other end of the scale, the Department of Health says that there are a large number of preparations, appliances and dressings for which only 50 items or fewer were dispensed in England in 2001. These account for just over half of the range of different preparations that were dispensed, but only 0.02 per cent of the actual items dispensed.

With such huge sums of money involved it is clear that both primary care pharmaceutical advisers and community pharmacists have the potential to save the NHS large amounts through prescribing advice and medicines management. Enforcing cost-effective prescribing and cutting down on wasted medication could contribute to the Chancellor's plans for a better and more efficient NHS.

TABLE 1: PRESCRIPTION COST ANALYSIS 2001 — THE TOP 10 ITEMS BY NIC

Generic	Brand	Company	2001		2000	
			Items (m)	NIC (£m)	Items (m)	NIC (£m)
Simvastatin	Zocor	MSD	5.3	184.8	4.1	144.1
Omeprazole	Losec	AstraZeneca	4.8	174.6	5.1	183.5
Atorvastatin	Lipitor	Pfizer	4.4	152.5	2.9	99.7
Lansoprazole	Zoton	Lederle	6.2	140.3	4.7	113.4
Amlodipine	Istin	Pfizer	6.3	129.0	5.6	115.5
Paroxetine	Seroxat	GlaxoSmithKline	3.8	93.3	3.4	83.3
Salmeterol	Serevent	GlaxoSmithKline	2.2	84.7	2.1	79.8
Doxazosin	Cardura	Pfizer	2.9	82.6	2.3	65.0
Goserelin	Zoladex	AstraZeneca	0.3	67.6	0.3	60.4
Citalopram	Cipramil	Lundbeck	2.8	53.8	2.0	38.2

Notes: Items = number of prescription items dispensed, NIC = net ingredient cost