

Royal Pharmaceutical Society

Medicines Shortages Report

A briefing for MSPs



Purpose of briefing

RPS published a Medicines Shortages Report in November 2024. This was written to provide clarity on what is causing shortages, what the impact on patients, pharmacists and healthcare professionals is and what can be done to mitigate and manage shortages.

The briefing is intended to:

- **Provide an overview of what the report says about why shortages are occurring and the effects this is causing. This is intended to help you respond to constituency casework on medicine shortages.**
- **Provide some policy recommendations which would help to relieve medicine shortages, which you may choose to advocate for in your role as an MSP.**

WHY ARE MEDICINE SHORTAGES OCCURRING?

Historically, availability and supply of medicines have often occurred for many different reasons. Medicine supply chains are long and complex, and medicines are heavily regulated products which can lead to delays between manufacture and delivery.

However, in the UK, the past two years have seen consistently elevated shortages. There is a growing consensus that the increase in medicines shortages that the UK and other countries are experiencing is becoming a new normal of frequent disruption to medicines supply. Currently, around 3% of medicines used by the NHS are in shortage including hormone replacement therapy, antibiotics, medicines used to treat diabetes, epilepsy and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder among many others.

The reasons for current medicine shortages are multifactorial and are outlined in full in RPS's Medicine Shortages report. They include: Manufacturing and product quality challenges, supply chain issues, regulatory challenges, globalisation, business and commercial issues, inadequate community pharmacy reimbursement, increased patient, environmental and manufacturing demand and stockpiling.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF MEDICINE SHORTAGES ON PATIENTS?

Patient charities indicating that patients are feeling the impact of shortages on their health and in their daily life.

Epilepsy and Parkinson's charities found nearly 40% of respondents with epilepsy reported having seizures induced by having to switch or skip medication, and 36% of respondents with Parkinson's reported their symptoms worsening.

In December 2023, an ADHD survey of over 2000 patients reported that medicines shortages had negative impacts on patients work, education and personal relationships.

Almost 70% of patients described feeling anxious, stressed, frustrated or similar when trying to source

prescribed medicines in short supply, with some describing how they experience these types of symptoms from the moment they request a new prescription.

Almost 20% of people describe a worsening of symptoms or an impact on their health because of having to go without regular medicines. Some describe rationing the supply of the medicines to conserve supplies.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT ON PHARMACISTS AND OTHER HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS?

Managing medicines shortages is now a daily reality for all pharmacy and healthcare teams.

Pharmacy teams often bear the brunt of the additional work; recent reports suggest almost three-quarters of community pharmacy staff estimate spending 1–2 hours a day or more trying to obtain medicine stock or alternatives.

Pharmacists tell us that they feel personally responsible when patients are unable to get the treatments that their patients need.

We hear from pharmacists in secondary care being facing with challenging ethical and moral decisions about which patients should be provided with the limited medicines that they were able to obtain. Decisions, such as these, about medicine allocation have been described as classic “tragic choices” which recognise the significant psychological distress for the clinicians involved.

Medicine shortages also affect other areas of the health and social care workforce, with prescribers in primary care needing to see patients’ multiple times, referred to them for alternative prescriptions. In hospitals, specialists requested to see patients who cannot be treated in primary care because medicines are unavailable or in short supply.

WHAT POLICIES COULD MSPs ADVOCATE FOR THAT WOULD HELP TO ALLEVIATE MEDICINE SHORTAGES?

- **Invest in the resources needed to manage medicines shortages**, including pharmacy workforce across the NHS and community pharmacy IT systems that help to mitigate and manage medicines shortages.
- **Review the Community Pharmacy Contractual Framework** to ensure that, whilst acknowledging a pharmacist’s professional and contractual responsibilities, it minimises the risk of individual contractors incurring a potential loss on the purchase of medicines, so supporting a stable supply of medicines to patients.
- **Enable greater data sharing to support planning and predict demand**, including between NHS, manufacturers and wholesalers to enable effective planning in both primary and secondary care; and further enabled by medicines manufacturers and wholesalers sharing relevant data.
- **Work with the UK government to develop a UK wide strategy for shortages** to improve medicines supply chain resilience and medicines security in the context of changing pharmaceutical market dynamics and the ongoing increases in medicines shortages globally.
- **Work with the UK government to support medicines manufacturing infrastructure**, in both commercial and NHS manufacturing units; in particular generic manufacturing which accounts for 80% of medicines prescribed in the NHS.

CONTACT

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