

Review of 'Conditions for which over the counter items should not routinely be prescribed in primary care'

Royal Pharmaceutical Society Response

General comment: This guidance could adversely affect a patient's health and care and also consequently target and potentially discriminate against people with long-term conditions, patients with multimorbidities, the young, cancer sufferers, the elderly and the poorest in society. Whilst we recognise the NHS needs to operate within its budget allocated by government this guidance could be seen to support health professionals being asked to restrict access to cost-effective treatment.

We do see the need to encourage people to move towards self-care, and to purchase self-care treatments when they are able to do so. We are also aware that people may go and see their GP to get a prescription for a product that can be purchased from a pharmacy so that they can obtain the product free of charge.

Community pharmacists are ideally placed to support patients to self-care and RPS continues to advocate for an NHS Pharmacy First Plus service, similar to that which has been commissioned in Scotland. Whilst the NHS Community Pharmacist Consultation Service goes some way towards this it has its limitations and issues with implementation of the service have been identified in our joint report with RCGP.

Having a Pharmacy First Plus service will help to reduce pressure on GPs and A&E. There is an opportunity to develop services in primary care utilising the skills of community pharmacists to support patients who do not have the means to purchase these products. Rather than making OTC medicines unavailable via the NHS, we suggest that more effort is used to embed self-care into the NHS and people's lives including actions to improve health literacy and support to help people live healthier lives.

We recognise this is a complex issue and would require a system wide approach and an overarching national strategy. Educating people about self-care and the benefit it can have both to themselves and the NHS could go a long way to reducing prescribing and supply of OTC medicines without the need to introduce restrictions.

Impact assessment:

In addition to the groups protected by the Equality Act 2010 people who cannot afford to pay for medicines available over the counter will be disproportionately affected by this work. Evidence should be obtained to clarify the impact on people on low incomes if OTC products are no longer able to be supplied on the NHS. If people are unable to access such products this could lead to greater health inequalities and also worsening health outcomes.