

Health & Care Public (H&CP) Forum meeting, 12th March 2024: Summary of the key points

Overview

The guest speakers were:

- Jo Tsovena, Pharmacy Development Manager (Sheffield), NHS South Yorkshire
- Claire Thomas, Community Pharmacy Clinical Lead, NHS South Yorkshire
- Heidi Taylor, Head of Medicines Optimisation, NHS South Yorkshire

The Forum were asked about **accessing medicines**, with a focus on:

- Specialist medicines - usually prescribed within a specialist setting but sometimes continued by a GP
- Medicine shortages - and how this experience can be improved.

The speakers' comments are shown in green text.
Forum members' comments are shown in the blue text.

Specialist medicines

Forum members shared their experiences in relation to specialist medicines:

- The relative of someone who took a rare specialist medication that was prescribed by the GP and supplied by a community pharmacy, found this arrangement helpful as it meant they didn't have to go to hospital to get the prescriptions. Shortages of the specialist medicines led to them phoning specialist companies, and shipping in the medicine from countries where it was sold over the counter.
- Someone chose to move to having specialist medicines prescribed by their GP. This suits them as they can order it online without seeing the GP and they get it at the same time as other prescribed items. The only negative is that sometimes the GP rejects prescription requests without an explanation.
- One person would have preferred to have had their consultant oversee their medication as the GP kept trying to adjust the dose and didn't seem to have specialist knowledge about their condition or the medication, thus highlighting the need for approaching shared care in such cases with caution.

The following points were made during a wider discussion about specialist medicines:

- We are lucky in Sheffield that we have the Children's Hospital but some families would need to travel much further for specialist medicines.
- Financial considerations could impact on decisions made by GPs to prescribe expensive medicines, with reluctance if the medicines are costly.

- Do local and hospital pharmacies have different obligations to help source specialist medicines when they are difficult to get? Under the NHS Community Pharmacy Framework there is an obligation to dispense with reasonable promptness, but there is no definition of 'reasonable'
- Are GPs obliged to take on ownership of consultant-led prescriptions? Clinicians should only prescribe within the limits of their capabilities. However, there are pathways to support and further learning. GPs will need to have dialogue with the specialist if they do not feel confident prescribing, so that patients can still access their medicines.

Medicines shortages

Some Forum members talked about their own experiences of medicine shortages, and how this had been handled. Many of these experiences focused on communication:

- A pharmacy had kept someone updated when they were trying to source their medication for them; this was appreciated.
- It isn't always clear why an item is missing when receiving prescribed medicines -it isn't known whether the person forgot to order it or the GP didn't prescribe it.
- It isn't clear why items are missing when medicines are delivered, and it is difficult to resolve when you can't visit the pharmacy.
- A forum member with dyslexia highlighted that they can experience difficulties getting medications prescribed, and following up when something is missing as they don't always know the correct name of it.
- Visiting the pharmacy in person can be the only way to find out what is happening with your prescription and not all people can do this easily.

Forum members discussed wider issues around medicine shortages:

- Someone pointed out issues around how ADHD medication shortages have become common and could impact on healthcare professionals time if an alternative needs to be prescribed.
- It was suggested that medications should come with a note to show which ones have been dispensed and a note or contact if things have not been dispensed, it could help prevent people making phone calls to find out what has happened.
- One person had noticed that the pharmacy they volunteer at spends a lot of time ringing round trying to source items.
- One person didn't know what to do if they did experience their medication not turning up.
- Short shelf-life and ad-hoc items (e.g. insulin) - you can't predict how much you will use each day so it can lead to medicines wastage.

They asked the following questions:

- To what extent is the supply of drugs regulated by the NHS? Pharmacies, manufacturers and wholesalers are private companies. They are all regulated through the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulation Agency. When there are shortages, sometimes this is in the manufacturing process (can't get an ingredient, issue with packaging etc). Sometimes it's an issue with transportation. Sometimes it's because of a surge in demand.
 - In situations where drugs are difficult to get, is there a case for South Yorkshire holding strategic supplies of these drugs and supplying pharmacies directly? This is something that has been considered before, but the current system is still in place partly because it drives down costs for the government. The government reimburse pharmacies for medications three months later, and decide what amount to reimburse them. Sometimes that means pharmacies are reimbursed for less than they paid for the medication. For some critical drugs there is ring-fencing. There's also the risk of 'panic buying' - if we stocked up in South Yorkshire, we would be draining that from somewhere else.
 - Is there not a way for wholesalers to have stock levels online, to stop pharmacists having to phone them all? Pharmacies can access stock information on ordering platforms, but this can change so quickly that it's not always accurate - this is available but not always working well. Perhaps we can address this with wholesalers at an ICS level.
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- The next meeting of the H&CP forum can be viewed [here](#).
 - Further information on the work of the H&CP forum can be viewed [here](#)