

Don't overlook generic drug alternatives



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Brand marketing can have a huge influence on our everyday purchases. In all types of markets, from food, cars, clothing and household cleaners, a common judgement is that generic versions are inferior to the often more expensive branded versions, even when the components are almost identical. As a pharmacist, I know the same can be said for pharmaceuticals especially when selling directly to a consumer who would request the most recognised brands despite a much higher cost. However, doctors and pharmacists are also consumers to drug companies, and can often overlook generic alternatives and prescribe more expensive brands when there are cheaper alternatives available.

But should pharmacists be allowed to automatically substitute prescriptions without the knowledge of the patient? Branded and generic products are classed as the same if the dose of the active ingredient and the formulation is equivalent. In most regions across the world, drug regulators do set strict standards for generic medication to ensure that the levels of active ingredient are sufficient enough to have the same therapeutic effects within a similar time-frame. Essentially, it should be the same product, with a slight varia-

tion on non-active ingredients which is just as effective for treatment.

A risk that does come with the varying ingredients in generics is, of course, if a patient has allergies. Many also argue that switching to generics can cause confusion to patients. For someone who has become accustomed to taking their medication in the form of a round white pill, to then suddenly be faced with a square pink pill can be very unsettling. This could be especially detrimental to those who rely heavily on routine, for example a person with Alzheimer's.

But when there is no significant difference between the two, increasing the use of generics could have a substantially positive impact on government spending. With costs of healthcare and levels of uncertainty in the economy rising, governments need to look at ways to safely cut costs fast. Here in the UK, a report called *Better Value in the NHS*, claimed that using generics has saved the National Health Service billions, and more importantly it has allowed an extra 490 million items to be prescribed to patients. As the Middle East increasingly moves towards insurance-based healthcare, and public healthcare spend is continually growing, generic medicines could be used to bring down costs and ensure affordable healthcare is available to everyone.

Several governments have already increased efforts to promote generic substitution to doctors and consumers and it seems

to be working. BMI Research estimates that generic drug sales currently hold 25% of the pharmaceutical sector in the Middle East, with potential to rise to 31% by 2025. Government schemes and policies to help promote generics could encourage pharma companies to get involved helping to provide generic substitutes, sometimes even as a cheaper version of their own original drug. It is also important to encourage a culture of prescribing medicines using the international non-proprietary name instead of the branded name so that consumers can be made more aware of which active ingredient is actually benefiting them.

Even in this economic downturn, we realise more often that health really is wealth, but that is no reason to pay over the odds for something that is potentially life-saving. Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations, was correct in saying that it is not enough to have effective and safe medicines if they are not affordable and available to those who need them.

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