



Scottish pharmacists relieve GP burden with minor ailment service

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MINOR AILMENT SERVICE, SCOTLAND

Scottish pharmacies have been providing a minor ailment service to patients over the last two years helping avoid a significant number of unnecessary GP appointments, saving time for both patients and their doctors.

All pharmacies in Scotland must now provide the service as part of their new contract. The service was initially outlined in *'The Right Medicine – a Strategy for Pharmacy in Scotland'*, which made a commitment to introduce schemes between GPs and community pharmacists for patients to use their pharmacy as the first port of call for the treatment of common illnesses.

Some 817,000 patients in Scotland were registered for the minor ailment service in June 2007 – a 100 per cent increase on those registered when the service began in July 2006.

WHY THE SERVICE IS NEEDED

“In the past, a lot of GP time was wasted on minor ailments that a pharmacist would have been able to deal with using over-the-counter medicines. We also used to get patients coming to us for advice, then going to their GP to get a free prescription for it because they didn't want to pay for the medicine,” says Alan Berrie, pharmacy manager at Lindsay & Gilmour Pharmacies.

“We see patients more frequently than their GP and they are more likely to come to us with a minor health condition than go to their doctor as they feel comfortable talking to their local pharmacist.”

Minor ailments are usually common, self-limiting conditions and can normally be managed with over-the-counter treatments by the patient, without the need to consult a doctor.

HOW THE SERVICE WORKS

To be eligible, patients first need to be registered with a GP in Scotland and they have to be exempt from prescription charges. They can then register for the minor ailment service with the pharmacy of their choice.

The pharmacist gets paid a fee which is dependent on the number of patients registered for the service at their pharmacy.

During the consultation, the pharmacist can offer the following:

- Advice only.
- Treatment.
- Refer the patient to their GP or other health professional.
- A combination of the above.

When a pharmacist provides treatment, it has to be in accordance with the national formulary for minor ailment services, the British National Formulary and the Scottish Drug Tariff.

“At the moment this is in paper form, but in future it will be available electronically,” says Alan.



During the consultation, the pharmacist enters information gathered onto the patient's electronic record. If advice only is given, this is entered and a form printed stating 'consultation only' – which the patient then signs. If the pharmacist prescribes a treatment, the same procedure is followed and a prescription form is printed stating what is prescribed, which the patient signs. If the patient is referred to the GP, again a form is printed stating this.

"If we see a patient out of hours, such as at the weekend, we have access to the Professional to Professional phone line at NHS 24 where we can discuss the patient's needs – saving the patient time," says Alan.

WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMONLY USED TREATMENTS?

The top 10 items most commonly dispensed through the minor ailment service between July 2006 and March 2007 were:

- Paracetamol (for pain, fever)
- Ibuprofen (pain, fever, inflammation)
- Simple linctus (cough)
- Malathion (scabies, headlice)
- Chloromphenicol (eye infection)
- Pholcodine (cough)
- Clotrimazole (thrush, athlete's foot)
- Pseudoephedrine Hydrochloride (congestion)
- Emollients (dry skin)
- Aciclovir (cold sores)

HOW SUCCESSFUL IS THE SERVICE?

Patients like the service and are keen to sign up for it – some 74,000 items were dispensed during March 2007, an 82 per cent increase on July 2006. The average pharmacist in Scotland sees 10 patients for minor ailments per day, with over 11,500 a day carried out across Scotland. Some 15 per cent of patients registered with a GP are also registered with a pharmacist for the minor ailment service.

"The minor ailment service offers patients a better service than they had before. Some patients have tried to take advantage of it, with anecdotes of patients presenting the pharmacist with a shopping list of remedies they require. But as long as you explain to them how the system works – they present with a condition and you decide what treatment they need – there aren't any problems," explains Alan.

"The GPs are pleased with the new service too as it's reduced the amount of time they have to spend dealing with minor conditions, especially during the winter months."

PROMOTING THE PHARMACIST'S ROLE

"I believe the minor ailment service has really done pharmacists a favour as it has raised our profile significantly with the public," says Alan.

"In some ways it's a return to the way things used to be before the NHS was set up and patients would only see their GP if they were really ill, as it was too expensive for most people. They would use their pharmacist as the first port of call for minor complaints and this is what we're moving towards again – allowing GPs to concentrate on more serious conditions. I think the minor ailment service is a platform from which pharmacists can build on for the future, offering an increasing number of services to patients."

