

Health advice from pharmacists saves hundreds of millions of euros

August 31 2010

Hundreds of millions of euros are being saved each year for national healthcare systems by patients consulting community pharmacists rather than going straight to their doctors, says a survey to be presented today at the annual conference of the International Pharmaceutical Federation (FIP). In Finland alone, well over €500 million was freed up in one year for other healthcare priorities through members of the public visiting pharmacists for general health advice, as well as the correction of prescription errors and information about the importance of adherence to prescriptions says the survey, which was carried out by the international auditing company PricewaterhouseCoopers and the Association of Finnish Pharmacies (AFP).

Although there has been anecdotal evidence of the economic value of the community [pharmacist](#) to healthcare systems, there were few properly conducted studies to prove the point, said Dr. Erkki Kostinen from the AFP, Helsinki. "We decided that it would be worthwhile to see how much these free professional services provided by community pharmacists really save elsewhere in healthcare. We thought that these savings would be substantial, but it is fair to say that we were surprised to find their true extent."

The study drew on the findings of public research results and a survey which was answered by 197 proprietary pharmacists (out of the 594 in existence in Finland) and six senior health centre physicians. The research was carried out in 2009, using statistics from the previous year. The public research results studied included those from a national study

of prescription errors as well as statistics from the Finnish social insurance and health and welfare institutions. Where opinions differed between pharmacists and physicians, an expert panel made up of pharmacists, a lawyer and an economist reviewed the answers. In order to avoid over-estimating financial savings, they erred towards a conservative assessment on each occasion.

Results from the study showed that visits to the pharmacist avoided 6.2 million visits to the general practitioner and 750,000 emergency visits per year. They also helped to reduce the need for prescriptions by 2.6 million per year. Pharmacy expertise was also estimated to save 123,000 inpatient nights in hospital.

"These savings add up to a total of €565 million per year, which can be spent on other important priorities in the national [healthcare system](#)," he said. "The majority of the saving - about €300 million - comes from fewer visits to the general practitioner. In many cases a pharmacist's guidance in self-care and non-prescription medication can be all that is needed and, if it is not, pharmacists are able to advise when a visit to the doctor is indicated," said Dr. Kostinen.

"Although some of the evaluations in the study are based on the opinions and experience of doctors and pharmacists rather than exact facts, they give a good indication of the total savings that were made. I see no reason why these findings should not be applicable in other countries. At a time when there are grave shortages of general practitioners in some European regions, this is not simply an economic but also a social benefit," said Dr. Kostinen.

The study also showed savings of nearly €70 million emergency costs, and around €100 millions each on prescription costs and nights in hospital.

"These savings are more than Finnish pharmacies' share of all medicine sales, which total €481 million", said Dr. Kostinen. "This means that savings for health care produced by the use of community pharmacies exceed the costs of outpatient medicine distribution. This is a very significant finding."

Mr. Ton Hoek, General Secretary and CEO of the FIP said:

"Pharmacists are highly qualified and possess detailed knowledge of medicines and their responsible use because of their in-depth education and training. I believe that their expertise should be utilised to the maximum not only for the benefit of patients, physicians and other healthcare professionals, but also to make savings in national healthcare systems. Now that healthcare is becoming more and more expensive and there is a move towards rationing of certain drugs and treatments, it is really madness that the valuable skills of pharmacists are not being used to the maximum benefit of patients.

"I hope that the results of this survey will persuade governments worldwide to encourage people to consult a pharmacist before going to see their GP and afterwards in order to be better informed about their prescriptions, possible medicine interactions, and compliance," he concluded.

Provided by International Pharmaceutical Federation

Citation: Health advice from pharmacists saves hundreds of millions of euros (2010, August 31) retrieved 5 May 2024 from

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