

SA's use of generic medicine on the rise

The South African public is starting to embrace the use of generic medicines, a trend that the Department of Health is hoping will continue. The generic medicines industry in South Africa provides cost-effective treatment for a wide range of health conditions, hence the theme for National Pharmacy Week, running from 1 - 8 September 2013, is 'Understanding generic medicines'.

"At Medicross pharmacies we have found that the use of generic medicines has been increasing exponentially in recent years. This has resulted in substantial savings for the consumer, as co-payments are either substantially lower or in many cases even eliminated. It has also brought about welcome and much needed savings for medical schemes," notes Zahida Khan, general pharmacy manager at Netcare's Primary Care division, which comprises Medicross and Prime Cure.

Tracking

This is clearly affirmed by the 2012 Mediscor Medicines Review (MMR), which tracks the medicine usage of members belonging to the majority of South Africa's medical schemes. According to the report, these medical scheme members' generic utilisation rate is currently 53.4%. This is slightly higher than the generic drug usage reported by the 27 countries of the European Union, which currently stands at 50%. However, in some countries like Germany, the United Kingdom and America, the generic substitution rate is over 80%.

What is also notable from the European statistics is that although generic medicines account for 50% of dispensed medicines, they total only 18% of pharmaceutical expenditure. "For many developed nations, the contribution of generic medicines to savings and broader access to medicines has helped secure the provision of quality healthcare," emphasise Vishala Gokool, national pharmacy manager at Netcare.

Role of pharmacists

In South Africa, pharmacists are playing an increasingly important role in the more prevalent use of generics. If generic alternatives to original patented drugs are available, it is mandatory by law for a pharmacist to suggest such alternatives to healthcare consumers. "This is all part of the pharmacist's role to educate, inform and ensure that consumers do not pay more than they have to for medicines," explains Khan.

Same benefits

Generic medicines are bioequivalent to the original product, meaning they deliver equal medicine benefits to the patient. Generic medicines have the same active ingredient, strength and dosage as their originator products and are used in the same way. They also have to be approved by the South African Medicines Control Council (MCC). "In addition, our rigorous procurement practices ensure that only quality generic medicines from reputable suppliers are sourced for Netcare and Medicross pharmacies," notes Khan.

Consumers may have doubts about the efficacy of generic medicines because of their cheaper price. But Gokool points out that the manufacturer of a generic does not have the same substantial development expenses as the original developer of a drug. "The generic manufacturer does not have to conduct trials to further prove the efficacy of a drug after the patent of the original brand has expired. With considerably fewer overheads, generic manufacturers can usually produce a drug that is considerably cheaper than the original. This is something that all hard-pressed healthcare consumers should be aware of.

"National Pharmacy Week is the ideal time for pharmacists to help clear up any confusion the public may have regarding use of generic medicines. Consumers need to know that generics are effective and safe, have been tested and approved, and are good value-for-money alternatives to original patented drugs. Pharmacists can be an invaluable source of information and their advice can put consumers in a stronger position to make an informed choice," concludes Gokool.

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