Prescriptions Dispensed in the Community:
England 2007 to 2017

Data Quality Statement

Accuracy

All prescription statistics in this bulletin are based on information systems at NHS Prescription Services, part of the NHS Business Services Authority. The system used is the Prescription Cost Analysis (PCA). The figures used are collected as an essential part of the process of reimbursing dispensers (mainly pharmacists and dispensing doctors) for medicines supplied. All prescriptions which are dispensed in England need to be submitted to NHS Prescription Services if the dispenser is to be reimbursed and so coverage should be complete.

NHS Prescription Services quality assures the data they provide. They state that due to the complex and manual processes involved there may be random inaccuracies in capturing prescription information which are then reflected in the data. Currently the prescription processing activity is internally audited by NHS Prescription Services to 99 per cent accuracy (i.e. at least 99 per cent of prescriptions are recorded accurately). Data is downloaded and collated on a quarterly basis by NHS Digital and validated against published tables from NHS Prescription Services to ensure accuracy.

Prescriptions are subject to a prescription charge but many people are eligible to receive prescriptions free of charge, if they meet certain exemption criteria. Due to the way data is recorded and then processed by NHS Prescription Services, 0.1 per cent of items (approximately 1 million items) do not include a reason for exemption.

NHS Digital believe that there is no reason to suggest that any analyses have been adversely affected by the data quality issues raised.

Further data quality details are available from NHS Prescription Services:
Relevance

NHS Digital publish annual PCA data for the latest year, at individual drug presentation level. The 2017 PCA publication can be found at: http://digital.nhs.uk/pubs/prescostanalysiseng2017

The ‘Prescriptions Dispensed in the Community’ publication expands on the April PCA publication by providing analysis and commentary of the data by therapeutic area. It highlights recent changes and the main trends over eleven years. The publication presents a summary of prescriptions dispensed in the community by community pharmacists, appliance contractors and dispensing doctors in England.

This publication is considered to be of particular interest to commissioners and policy makers to monitor levels of medicine use and cost, highlighting changes over time. However, data and findings are likely also to be of interest to a much broader base of users. NHS Digital is keen to gain a better understanding of the users of this publication and of their needs; feedback is welcome and may be sent to enquiries@nhsdigital.nhs.uk (please include ‘Prescribing’ in the subject line).

Comparability and Coherence

The Prescription Cost Analysis (PCA) system records all prescriptions dispensed in England. These prescriptions will have been written by general practitioners and other prescribers, including dentists and those written in hospitals, which were then dispensed in the community.

As such, it differs from the prescribing information system provided by NHS Prescription Services to the NHS via the internet. This information is prescriber-based and records all prescriptions written in England, regardless of where they were dispensed. Prescriptions written by dentists and those written in hospitals are not included in these figures.

Users can misinterpret PCA data as relating to numbers of patients but care should be taken as PCA data relates to prescription items dispensed not individuals. One individual may have a prescription item, for the same medicine, dispensed a number of times over a year.

UK comparisons

Separate collections of PCA data are undertaken by Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. There are a number of important differences between the countries in the way that data measures are collected and classified, and because of differences between countries in the organisation of health and social services. For these reasons, any comparisons made between PCA and other UK data should be treated with caution.
Comparisons over time


Changes to the figures over time need to be interpreted in the context of changes in available medicines and their cost, and changes in NHS practice. For example, a reduction in items dispensed for a particular medicine may be due to the introduction of alternative medicines, or a change in prescribing behaviour, especially in the length of treatment each item is intended to cover.

The recording of exception data (regarding why people have received free prescriptions) has changed over time and should be interpreted with care. From January 2012 exception data has been processed through a new methodology which records the reason for any exemption for each prescription. Up to 2007, information on prescribing by exemption group was compiled using a 1 in 20 sample of all exempt items. In December 2007, NHS Prescription Services changed the process for pricing prescriptions and for capturing prescription charge exemption status. As a result, NHS Prescription Services were unable to reliably estimate the data for each exemption category from this date.

Changes to clinical classifications

PCA uses the therapeutic classifications defined in the British National Formulary using the classification system prior to BNF edition 70. Further information about these classifications, and changes to them, can be found at: https://www.bnf.org/ and https://www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/nhs-prescription-services

Timeliness and Punctuality

Prescription Cost Analysis is published in April each year. Prescriptions Dispensed in the Community repeats and expands the PCA information and is published in late June or early July each year. The publication date is determined by the availability of the data from NHS Prescription Services and allows adequate time for the compilation of the report.

Accessibility and Clarity

Following a user consultation and through analysis of usage information and discussion with users, we have identified the user base would have its needs well met by the extra information being released earlier as tables of data, together with information around quality, rather
than waiting for a second report to become available with more in depth commentary that repeats previously released figures.

This publication will be the last in the Prescriptions Dispensed in the Community series. The appendix tables will in future be released earlier as part of the PCA series together with information around quality.

This publication is being made available on the NHS Digital internet as a combination of web pages and downloadable reports and data files. The publication may be requested in large print or other formats through NHS Digital’s contact centre: enquiries@nhsdigital.nhs.uk (please include ‘Prescribing’ in the subject line).

**Performance Cost and Respondent Burden**

The figures used in this publication are collected as part of the process of reimbursing dispensers for drugs supplied. The publication therefore uses an existing administrative source. Information about the administrative source and its use for statistical purposes is included in the NHS Digital’s Statement of Administrative Sources at: http://content.digital.nhs.uk/article/1789/Statement-of-administrative-sources

**Confidentiality, Transparency and Security**

The standard NHS Digital data security and confidentiality policies have been applied in the production of these statistics. Disclosure control is implemented where judged necessary.