



Driving the self care agenda

Over the past year, PAGB has been working with IMS Health to research and gather evidence of the savings that could be made by the NHS if patients were to increase self-medication for minor ailments. Andy Tisman from IMS Health summarises the key findings of the first study to provide quantification of minor ailment workload in general practice.



KEY FINDINGS

Minor ailments: 1 in 5 consultations in general practice

Drawing on data from the 'IMS Disease Analyzer', a database containing de-identified GP patient records from 210 practices, and applying it to the whole UK population, IMS Health has estimated that some **57 million GP consultations a year** (or 220,000 consultations/day) involve minor ailments and that in over 90% of these the patient is then issued with a prescription.

This is at a total cost to the NHS of around **£2 billion**, with 90% of consultations being for minor ailments only. Of these costs, 75% account for GPs' time, equating to £1.5 billion and over an hour a day for every GP.

Ten ailments account for three quarters of all minor ailment consultations and three quarters of all minor ailment costs to NHS budgets. The research also reveals that ten conditions (see table below) account for 75% of all minor ailment consultations.

IMS Health has concluded that a very high proportion of the minor ailment workload can be considered as theoretically suitable for self care. Focusing efforts to promote self care around just these ten conditions, for example, would release time for GPs to spend treating patients with more serious conditions.

TOP 10 MINOR AILMENTS BY NUMBER OF CONSULTATIONS	
Minor Ailment	Total Consultations (millions)
Back Pain	8.4
Dermatitis	6.8
Heartburn and indigestion	6.8
Nasal Congestion	5.3
Constipation	4.3
Migraine	2.7
Cough	2.6
Acne	2.4
Sprains and Strains	2.2
Headache	1.8

This is not a complete list of minor ailments

IMS Health has concluded that a very high proportion of the minor ailment workload can be considered as theoretically suitable for self care.

THE COST OF MINOR AILMENT CONSULTATIONS IN 2006-2007

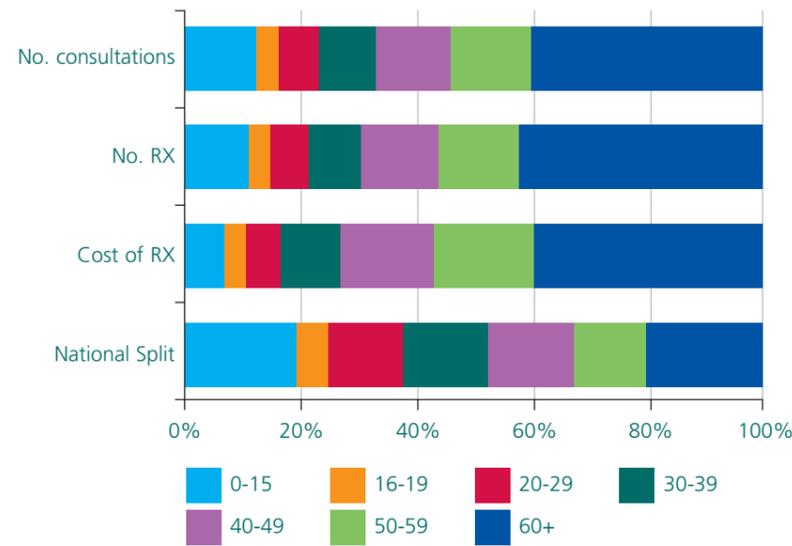
- 57 million GP consultations per annum (equating to 220,000 a day) involve minor ailment discussion, 90% of which (51.4 million) are for minor ailments alone
- 20% of the annual 290 million total GP consultations¹ involve minor ailments and 18% of total GP consultations are for minor ailments only
- 91% of minor ailment consultations result in a prescription being issued (52 million prescriptions per annum) at a cost of £370 million
- £2 billion of NHS resource is allocated to minor ailment consultations (consultation & prescription costs²), 90% of which (£1.8 billion) are for minor ailment only consultations
- Over 75% of the cost for minor ailment consultations is attributable to the GP's time, equating to £1.5 billion
- The top 10 minor ailments are responsible for 75% of consultation costs and 85% of prescription costs, amounting to £1.62 billion

1. Information Centre for Health and Social Services, 2006/7

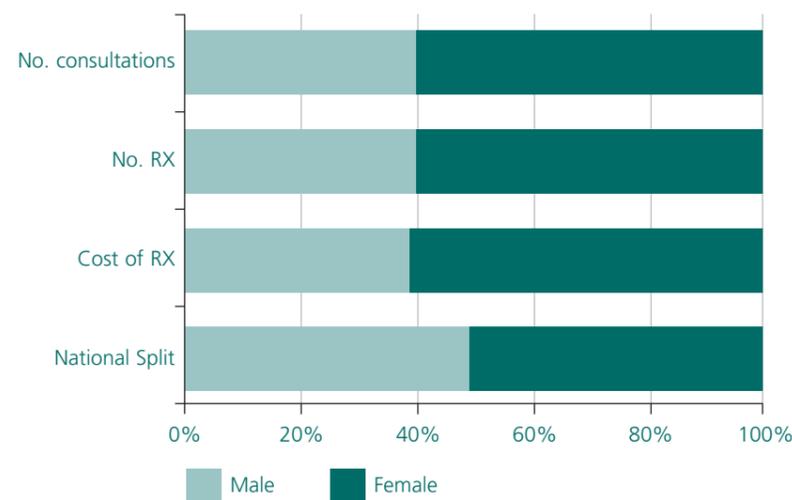
2. Consultation costs based on PSSRU 2006 £2.50 per minute and average length of consultation is 11.7minutes from the Information Centre for Health and Social Services, 2006/7 resulting in £29.25. Prescription costs based on £370m from the MIMS price index.



Driving the self care agenda



The number of minor ailment consultations and prescriptions reflects national age demographics, apart from the elderly population who are over-represented and the 0-15 years age group who are under-represented. Those over 60 years old are responsible for the greatest proportion of minor ailment consultations and prescriptions when compared to national population numbers. The minor ailment consultations for the 0-15 year old age group generate prescriptions that on average cost the NHS less than other age groups.



There are also more consultations generated by women than men. While the population split is close to 50/50, minor ailment consultations, prescriptions and cost split approximately 60/40 towards women. This is consistent with the anecdotal view that men may under-treat in general.



SELF CARE: SAVING GP TIME, IMPROVING PATIENT OUTCOMES

With GPs able to allocate more time each day to the treatment of more serious conditions patient outcomes would improve and, as the research highlights, the biggest potential savings to the NHS budget in relation to minor ailment consultations would be made.

Encouraging people who are seeking treatment or advice to reduce their dependency on GPs and take greater responsibility for dealing with minor ailments by drawing on the support of other healthcare professionals, including pharmacists, will require a considerable programme of change led by the government. The concept of a national minor ailment scheme, the promotion of pharmacists as healthcare professionals and other ideas outlined in the Pharmacy White Paper³, suggest that the government is listening to stakeholder groups and taking note of our research into NHS efficiencies.

SELF CARE PRESCRIPTIONS

One possible mechanism for making this happen would see the introduction of GP self care prescriptions. These would direct patients to a pharmacy for advice and appropriate treatment.

SUMMARY

The IMS Health research, funded by PAGB, has provided further evidence of the growing time and prescription burden on the healthcare system of GP treatment of minor ailments and 'Pharmacy in England' acknowledges these findings. The White Paper signals a green light for developing the self care strategy and the proposal of a national minor ailment scheme goes some way towards the goal of directing NHS resources to where they will have most impact on patient outcomes. IMS Health is pleased to have collaborated with PAGB in this evidence-based study which has helped to drive forward the self care agenda. ■

3. White paper, Pharmacy in England: Building on strengths – delivering the future, 2008

Encouraging people who are seeking treatment or advice to reduce their dependency on GPs and take greater responsibility for dealing with minor ailments... will require a considerable programme of change led by the government.