Prescribing volume and costs for primary care in 2013

Steve Chaplin BPharm, MSc

Steve Chaplin analyses the statistics for prescribing in primary care in 2013, which reveal a period of slow growth in volume with a slower fall in costs.

More than one billion items were dispensed in the community in England in 2013 at a total cost of £8.6 billion. This was a 2.9 per cent increase in volume over 2012, which was itself a 3.8 per cent increase over 2011 (see Figure 1). Costs fell by 1.2 per cent compared with a 3.3 per cent reduction between 2011 and 2012, with an average net ingredient cost (NIC) per item in 2013 of £8.37 – equivalent to a reduction of 2 per cent, or 15p, compared with 2012.

Figure 2 shows the proportion of total volume and NIC by BNF category (excluding appliances and dressings). Cardiovascular and CNS drugs account for half of prescribing volume, with endocrine, gastrointestinal and respiratory drugs making up a further quarter. However, nearly one-quarter of spending was for CNS drugs, with cardiovascular, endocrine and respiratory drugs together making up 40 per cent of the total.

Compared with 2012, there was a small increase in volume for all categories except CNS drugs. Changes in costs were similarly small though more variable, but spending on cardiovascular drugs fell to below £1 billion – a drop of 14 per cent probably caused by the loss of patent protection for atorvastatin (NIC £13.06 per item in 2012, £2.32 in 2013).

Dressings and appliances accounted for significant spending. There were approximately 9 million prescriptions for dressings at a cost of £190 million, 17 million for appliances (£250 million), 2 million for incontinence appliances (£50 million) and 4.6 million for stoma appliances (£248 million).

Top 20 medicines

The most frequently prescribed drug in 2013 was, unsurprisingly, simvastatin (40 million items) but it is perhaps unexpected that the most expensive drugs were levothyroxine (£87 million), co-codamol (£84 million) and paracetamol (£82 million), with 28, 15 and 23 million items respectively (see Figure 3).

These are category M medicines, for which the price is set by the Department of Health based on information from manufacturers. Although its introduction is credited with reducing overall spending, category M has a track record of awarding high prices to old drugs. For example, the cost of levothyroxine increased by one-third when it became a category M drug and in April 2014 the Drug Tariff price for 32 paracetamol 500mg tablets was 84p, 6p more than the price on the high street.

A glance at the top 20 drugs shows that older high-volume drugs feature more than newer high-cost brands. This
could be a reflection of the conservative nature of prescribing in primary care after years of cost pressures, but it is also a reminder that new, expensive treatments tend to be prescribed in secondary care. In 2012, hospitals accounted for 37 per cent of total NHS prescribing volume, up from 33 per cent in 2011, and an increase of 11 per cent in spending compared with an overall cost growth of 1.5 per cent.

**Top five drug categories**

Lipid-regulating agents accounted for the highest proportion of the 307 million prescriptions for cardiovascular drugs (22 per cent volume) followed by ACE inhibitors (14 per cent), antiplatelet drugs (13 per cent), calcium-channel blockers (12 per cent) and beta-blockers (11 per cent). Of the £980 million spent on this category, lipid-regulating agents comprised the largest proportion (25 per cent) followed by calcium-channel blockers (12 per cent), with angiotensin-II receptor blockers (ARBs) coming third with 9 per cent.

Of the 178 million prescriptions for CNS drugs, 23 per cent were for...
nonopioid analgesics, 16 per cent for SSRIs and 12 per cent for opioids. Increased prescribing for epilepsy is apparent, with antiepileptic drugs (AEDs) now accounting for 11 per cent of volume. AEDs also made up the greatest proportion of the £1.79 billion spent on CNS drugs (24 per cent), far outstripping opioids (16 per cent), nonopioid analgesics (10 per cent) and antipsychotics (8 per cent).

Prescribing of endocrine drugs is dominated by thyroid hormones (29 per cent of 96 million prescriptions) and metformin (19 per cent) but different drugs for diabetes account for most of the costs. Of the £1.136 billion spent in this category, intermediate- and long-acting insulins accounted for 21 per cent, other antidiabetic drugs for 16 per cent and short-acting insulins for 8 per cent. Glucose monitoring products made up a further 13 per cent.

Most of the 66 million prescriptions for respiratory drugs were for beta$_2$-agonists (34 per cent), inhaled steroids (29 per cent) and antihistamines (20 per cent). However, steroids accounted for 61 per cent of the £1.11 billion spent on this category, trailed by inhaled antimuscarinics (18 per cent) and beta$_2$-agonists (10 per cent).

Proton pump inhibitors (PPIs) account for 57 per cent of the 88 million prescriptions for gastrointestinal drugs, with another 18 per cent for laxatives. Of the £454 million spent on this category, 28 per cent was for PPIs and 21 per cent for laxatives. A further 18 per cent of spending was for aminosalicylates.

**Summary**

Primary-care prescribing appears to be returning to a period of slow growth in volume with a slower fall in costs. Cardiovascular and CNS drugs continue to dominate prescribing mostly due to the use of older agents, but within some categories newer drugs account for a disproportionate share of spending.

**Declaration of interests**

None to declare.

*Steve Chaplin is a pharmacist who specialises in writing on therapeutics*