

Minimising medicine costs

Death and taxes aside, anticipating the future is an impossible task. Nevertheless, history will often give us a clue as to what is to come. And so, we've come to expect that each January there will be an increase in the cost of Government subsidised pharmaceutical benefit (PBS) prescriptions.

It's no surprise then that this happened again in 2013.

In fact, the actual cost of the prescription item may not have increased (indeed many commonly used PBS prescription items have decreased in price); but the Government has determined that the component of the medicine cost that we pay - the so-called patient co-payment - should increase; and this increase is generally in line with the CPI (consumer price index).

Of course, for those of us required to take medicines regularly - perhaps for a chronic condition like arthritis, asthma, depression, diabetes, epilepsy or heart disease - the costs might seem overwhelming.

Nevertheless, successive Australian Governments have maintained policies which have ensured we have access to the least expensive medicines in the world - certainly for medicines proven to be both safe and effective. And there are ways we can reduce the cost of medicines even further.

Even at the maximum of now \$36.10 per item, the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme still offers us pretty good value for money. Some medicines actually cost many hundreds (occasionally even thousands) of dollars more than the co-payment; and this full cost of PBS medicines is now printed on the dispensed label; an indication of the real cost of each medicine is there for us all to see.

So, \$36.10 is the most you should have to pay (some medicines will cost less than this); and if you have a concession card issued by Centrelink (Department of Social Security) or the Department of Veterans Affairs, the maximum amount payable is \$5.90 per prescription item.

It is now well known that some brands of medicines cost more than others and the government subsidises up to the cost of only the lowest-priced brand. A doctor or pharmacist can give you more advice about this brand price premium and how to avoid any extra charge. At your request the pharmacist can often substitute a less expensive brand. Remember all medicines in Australia are required to meet the Therapeutic Goods Administration's (TGA's) high standards of quality, safety and effectiveness – and the standards are exactly the same for the less expensive and the more expensive brands.

In any event, another way of curbing the cost of prescription medicines is for you to keep a record of spending on PBS prescriptions on a Prescription Record Form (PRF). If you have all or most of your prescriptions dispensed at the same pharmacy, the pharmacist will be able to keep a computer record of these transactions.

When you have a record of spending \$1390.60 on PBS medicines for yourself and your dependents in a calendar year, the cost of all subsequent items during the year comes back to \$5.90 each. This is called the PBS Safety Net. It gives reasonable financial protection for patients and their families if they require a large number of medicines.

For concession card holders, the Safety Net threshold is \$354.00 – equivalent to 60 items at \$5.90 each – after which there is no charge for any PBS item, provided one of the lowest-priced brands is dispensed.

If you want some more advice about the savings you can make with the PBS Safety Net and by choosing the less expensive brands of PBS medicines, ask for the Help with Medicine Costs fact card at your local Self Care Pharmacy. For the nearest location Call 1300 369 772 or check out the Pharmaceutical Society website at www.psa.org.au Click on "Self Care" then "Use the Self Care Pharmacy Finder".