

Prif Swyddog Fferyllol
Chief Pharmaceutical Officer



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

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By email

19 July 2024

Dear Adrian,

Community Pharmacy Data Matching Pilot

Thank you for your letter of 23 May and the accompanying report describing the findings and recommendations of Audit Wales' community pharmacy data matching pilot. Given the scale of public expenditure on medicines and pharmaceutical services, tackling fraud and error is of considerable importance and I am grateful to you and your colleagues for taking the time to investigate risk in the community pharmacy sector so thoroughly.

I am particularly pleased this extensive pilot involving almost 30% of pharmacies in Wales over a three-year period, found no evidence of systemic fraud or error. I consider these findings are likely to be representative given the large sample size, the mix of pharmacies and prescriptions dispensed in the sample, and the duration of the field work. The report therefore provides welcome assurance in this area of high spend and scrutiny.

Whilst not making specific recommendations, you ask three questions NHS Wales, should ask itself, given the findings of your pilot.

Are you satisfied with the current approaches in each health board, and across NHS Wales, to identify and investigate outliers in relation to high cost and risk of fraud for dispensing contractor activity?

As I have set out above the report provides a great deal of reassurance that auditors were unable to find any evidence of systemic fraud or error within the community pharmacy

Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.



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sector. Of course, we cannot be complacent given there may be some types of fraudulent activity which were not investigated by the pilot or fraud may be occurring in health boards other than those included in the sample.

There are examples of significant fraudulent practice having occurred in the community pharmacy sector such as those described in the report. It is reassuring that these historic cases were identified by health boards working closely with NHS Counter Fraud Services, through checks and balances which pre-date the pilot.

The pilot identified risks in three main areas: pricing errors, expensive items and specials.

On pricing errors, between 6 million and 7 million prescriptions in Wales are processed for payment by the NHS Wales Shared Services Partnership every month. Prescription payment accuracy is consistently high with an error rate of only around 1 per 1000 prescriptions processed. Where processing errors occur, they are as likely to result in underpayments to pharmacies as they are in overpayment by the NHS. Audit Wales' work only considered overpayments and it is therefore likely that further investigation of errors would cancel out any potential savings for the NHS over time. The level of pricing accuracy is agreed between the NHS and Community Pharmacy Wales on behalf of pharmacy contractors we do not therefore propose to take any further actions to address under and overpayments. It will however remain possible to make corrections in respect of individual errors on an ad hoc basis.

Turning to expensive items, I agree additional checks by health boards are likely to improve how risks are managed in this area. Whilst I am aware health boards may undertake some checks on expensive prescriptions already, such checks generally focus on the prescriber of the medicine rather than the pharmacy which dispensed it. I agree with your assessment that health boards would have greater assurance if additional checks on pharmacies dispensing large numbers of expensive prescriptions were undertaken. We will therefore take three actions to improve the work health boards undertake in this area.

Firstly, we have commissioned the Wales Analytical Prescribing Support Unit (WAPSU) to develop an interactive expensive items dashboard which can be accessed by health boards and used to identify expensive prescriptions issued by general practitioners and hospital outpatient departments in their area. The dashboard allows health board users to access aggregated and individual prescription data including the individual prescription images retained by the NHS Wales Shared Services Partnership.

Secondly, we will work with the NHS Wales Shared Services Partnership to develop a monthly report detailing expensive items dispensed by pharmacies in each health board area and make this report routinely available to health boards.

Finally, we will write to health boards providing information about both the interactive dashboard and the community pharmacy expensive items report, asking them to confirm what arrangements they will put in place to ensure the new tools are used to minimise the risk of fraud or error occurring within the health board.

Are key lessons and best practice around these matters being shared between health boards? For example, are the health boards sharing examples of where fraud has been identified to make them aware of risks?

I agree there are likely to be significant benefits arising from sharing lessons learned and best practice between health boards. We will therefore write to the Head of NHS Counter Fraud Services in Wales and the Directors of Pharmacy of each health board asking what arrangements might be put in place to facilitate such information sharing.

Is there scope for the NHS in Wales to put extra cost-effective controls in place around the variable costs of specials?

Specials are often considerably more expensive than licenced medicines, due to the bespoke nature of the product and include costs of sourcing raw materials, manufacturing, quality control, or importing products and distribution.

The nature of specials make them much more liable to price fluctuations arising from changes to the prices of raw materials or from an urgent need for a special to be manufactured where a surcharge may be payable for faster delivery.

Action has been taken over a number of years to reduce the cost of specials to the NHS. In 2011, standard reimbursement prices were introduced for the most commonly prescribed manufactured specials (for example liquids, creams and ointments made to an individual formula). Between 2018 when Audit Wales began its fieldwork, and 2023 the total annual spend on these medicines fell by more than 50% (from £1.01 to £0.48m per year) as a result of the changes.

More recently in March 2022, further changes were made to reduce the cost of unlicensed, imported medicines by incentivising pharmacy contractors to source these medicines at the cheapest price possible, reducing variation and excessive prices that do not reflect the cost of manufacturing the special. In the first year following these further changes costs fell by 5% (from £0.65m to £0.62m).

The reimbursement costs of specials have been subject to scrutiny for a number of years including as part of a Department of Health and Social Care [consultation](#) in 2019. Various approaches including requiring pharmacy contractors to obtain quotes from several manufacturers, seeking central approval to place orders, and a national specials' procurement service, have all been proposed and discounted as being unlikely to result in significant cost savings.

Given the changes made since Audit Wales' fieldwork, the previous consultation and analysis of options, and the significant reduction in cost in recent years, I do not consider the same potential exists to make the savings estimated by Audit Wales in future years. However, there continues to be potential for health boards to review individual prescriptions for high cost specials which could be replaced with a lower cost standard licensed preparation. The interactive expensive items dashboard developed by WAPSU will support health boards to identify additional opportunities to query the prescribing of expensive unlicensed specials.

I trust this information demonstrates the steps we are taking to ensure fraud is identified and wherever possible prevented in the community pharmacy sector in Wales. The additional actions we will take as a direct result of the data matching pilot will serve to strengthen health boards' approach further and I am grateful to you and your colleagues for your interest and assistance in this important area.

I am copying this letter to the Chairs of Senedd Cymru's Public Accounts and Public Administration Committee, Health and Social Care Committee, and Finance Committee, for information.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Andrew Evans', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Andrew Evans FRPharmS
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Llywodraeth Cymru/Welsh Government