

## News release

Strictly embargoed until 00:01 hours, Thursday 24 January 2013

### NHS management of GP prescribing has improved

The NHS in Scotland has improved how it manages prescribing in general practice during a period when it has faced considerable pressures. Spending on drugs has fallen in real terms over the past seven years despite the volume of prescriptions rising significantly.

GP prescribing accounts for 70 per cent of all NHS spending on drugs in Scotland. This amounts to almost £1 billion a year. Audit Scotland has today published *Prescribing in general practice in Scotland*, its third report on the subject. The report says the health service has improved its management of GP prescribing, and family doctors are getting more support and guidance on their prescribing. Spending fell by 11 per cent in real terms between 2004 and 2011, despite the volume of prescriptions rising by a third during that time.

The report says there is scope for further improvements and potential to save up to £26 million a year without affecting patient care. This could mostly be done through reducing waste and cutting the use of less suitable medicines.

Auditor General for Scotland, Caroline Gardner, said: 'Most people in Scotland get a prescription from their family doctor at some point to treat or prevent an illness or help sustain a good quality of life. The NHS spends almost £1 billion a year on drugs prescribed in general practice. Since we last looked at GP prescribing, the volume of drugs prescribed has continued to rise but the NHS has significantly improved how it manages spending. This was during a period when there have been considerable pressures and constraints on the health service.

'It has achieved this through providing doctors with more support and guidance and using better information about what GPs are prescribing. Demand for prescriptions is likely to increase further and it's important that the NHS continues to work with GPs to make sure patients get the drugs they need and spending is well managed.'

The health service now has better quality information on GPs' prescribing than in the past. The report recommends NHS boards use this to target areas for further improvement, such as identifying where particular drugs are over- or under-prescribed and supporting GPs to review patients who take a number of different medicines.

In coming years a number of factors will affect prescribing and its associated spending, and it is difficult to forecast and quantify their long-term impact. These factors include new medicines and cheaper versions of existing drugs becoming available, Scotland's ageing population, and lifestyle issues such as obesity, smoking and alcohol misuse and associated illnesses. The unclear long-term picture means it is important the NHS continues supporting cost-effective prescribing to get the most from the significant investment.

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#### Notes to editors

1. Today's report follows earlier Audit Scotland reports on GP prescribing, published in 1999 and 2003. Those reports, and all our reports since 2000, can be found on Audit Scotland's website [www.audit-scotland.gov.uk](http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk)
2. In 2011/12 there were 91 million prescriptions issued by around 1,000 GP practices in Scotland, costing £974 million. Territorial NHS boards spend around 11 per cent of their annual budgets on GP prescriptions.
3. The report says it is too early to tell whether the abolition of prescription charges in Scotland has an impact on prescribing. Charges were phased out in Scotland from April 2008 and abolished completely in April 2011.
4. Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000, under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act, 2000. Audit Scotland has prepared this report for the Auditor General for Scotland.

5. The Auditor General is responsible for securing the audit of the Scottish Government and most other public bodies in Scotland, except local authorities. She investigates whether spending bodies achieve the best possible value for money and adhere to the highest standards of financial management. The Auditor General is independent and is not subject to the control of the Scottish Government or the Scottish Parliament.