

Embargoed until 00.01 hours Thursday 26 June 2003

DRUG PRESCRIBING IMPROVES BUT NATIONAL GUIDELINES NEED TO BE COSTED

There have been considerable improvements in the quality and efficiency of prescribing by general practitioners, according to a new report out today by Audit Scotland. However, implementing national guidelines on prescribing is having significant cost implications for primary care trusts.

The report shows that, based on a number of indicators, the quality of prescribing over the past three years has improved, including a dramatic increase in the prescribing of drugs for cardiovascular disease.

The study also found that all trusts had achieved efficiency savings over the last three years. It identifies room for further savings of around £14 million, but accepts this will be challenging to achieve.

Even savings such as these however are likely to be overshadowed by the rising cost of new drugs: the report notes a £28 million increase over six months in the cost of prescribing for treatment of cardiovascular and central nervous system problems alone. Total spending on primary care prescribing is around £845 million a year and is rising at a rate of around 13 per cent annually.

“Evidence-based national guidance can greatly improve the quality of prescribing,” said Deputy Auditor General Caroline Gardner. “But it can also add considerably to a trust’s costs. For example, spending on statins (a drug used to counter cardiovascular disease) is expected to grow from £65 million to over £95 million a year. This is around 12% of the total prescribing budget.

“The implementation of guidance should be managed carefully and targeted accurately so that the extra spending achieves greatest patient benefits.”

Audit Scotland recommends that guidelines on prescribing include an assessment of their cost impact, and that guidelines with significant cost implications should be considered alongside developments in other parts of the health service. This would allow health boards and trusts to set more accurate budgets.

For further information please contact Katie Fleming or James Gillies on 0131 624 9970/9971

Notes

1. Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000, under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act, 2000. It provides services to the Accounts Commission and the Auditor General for Scotland.
2. The Auditor General is responsible for securing the audit of the Scottish Executive and most other public bodies in Scotland, except local authorities. He 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 Executive or the Scottish Parliament.