

## **Your medicines and why cheaper doesn't mean inferior**

*By Dr Paul Williams*

*West Norfolk CCG's Governing Body member responsible for Prescribing and Education*

In our last article we discussed the efforts GPs were making to improve the value for money in the NHS and how you may be changed to an equally effective medication which costs less. This month we will explain how drugs are priced within the NHS and why 'cheaper' doesn't mean inferior.

When a new medication becomes available, its brand is protected by patent for several years. When this patent expires other pharmaceutical companies can produce the same drug often at a reduced price. These drugs are known as 'generics'. Generic medications must undergo rigorous pharmaceutical checks to ensure they are equivalent in terms of quality, safety and effectiveness to the branded drug. Switching to a generic medication or alternative drug does not mean you are receiving an inferior treatment. Often the cheapest drugs are the best as they have been around for a long time. Occasionally branded medicines can be cheaper for the NHS to supply than generics and so your medication may be prescribed by its brand name rather than its drug name. The price of a medication to the NHS does not reflect its effectiveness in treating your condition.

When your GP decides to change your medication on advice from West Norfolk Clinical Commissioning Group Prescribing Team, you will receive a letter or message on the right hand side of your prescription to inform you of the change. Your local community pharmacist or GP practice dispensary are available for advice and can help to explain the differences in the packaging or colour/ size /shape of the medication. These changes will result in saving money, which means that the NHS will be able to use the savings to provide additional and otherwise unavailable treatments and procedures for patients.

Medications and treatment guidelines are constantly evolving hence the need for your GP or Pharmacist to review your medications on a regular basis. As our bodies get older our ability to break down and process medications may become impaired. For this reason medications which were appropriate in the past may start to cause adverse effects and may require a dose reduction or even stopping altogether. This is to ensure that the risks of taking your medications do not outweigh the benefits. It is not due to a cost cutting exercise or denying you essential treatments for the management of your conditions.

Over £1 million is wasted on medicines every year in the West Norfolk area. Wasted medicines are classed as those which are prescribed but never taken. Unfortunately even if medication which has been dispensed to you is returned to a Pharmacy/Dispensary they have to be destroyed because it is not possible to confirm that the medications have not been tampered with or stored correctly. Therefore it is crucial that you only order what you need. If you are receiving medications which you are not taking, please tell your GP or Pharmacist. There may be an alternative that may be more suitable for you or the medication may be stopped altogether if not required.

Next month we will explore some of the issues around medications for respiratory diseases and how you can help your NHS to effectively manage these conditions.