

High medicine prices and poor availability

So much evidence but where is the action?

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Millions of people in low- and middle-income countries cannot afford or obtain the medicines they need. These are the sobering findings of an analysis by Alexandra Cameron and others published in today's Lancet.

"This analysis provides firm evidence of the dismal situation people with illnesses face every day" said Margaret Ewen, HAI's coordinator of the WHO/HAI Project on Medicine Prices and Availability. "It's shocking that many important medicines are so hard to find in government outlets, and so expensive in private pharmacies. How are people expected to pay days or, in some cases, weeks of their salary each month to buy the treatments they need?"

The analysis is based on findings from 45 surveys carried out since 2001 in 36 countries using a standardised methodology developed by HAI and WHO. Across the surveys, public sector availability of generics averaged a disappointing 38%. Even in the private sector, the availability of generics was far from ideal.

Where patients have to pay for medicines in the public sector even generics can be high priced. In the private sector, the price of originator brands and generics is often substantially higher making many treatments, particularly those for chronic diseases, simply unaffordable. In Africa, for example, a low-paid worker has to pay between two days' to eight days' wages each month to buy glibenclamide to treat diabetes.

Across the surveys, in the private sector originator brands cost 260% more than lowest priced generic equivalents – increasing to 1000% or more in some countries. Implementing policies that increase the use of low-priced quality generics would help significantly. Policies to ensure competition, incentives for pharmacies to dispense low-priced generics, and education programmes for the public as well as health professionals to address misconceptions about generics are crucial.

Governments could also ease the burden on patients by procuring medicines efficiently, passing on low procurement prices to patients, and ensuring the availability of essential medicines in all public sector outlets. There are many other factors that influence the price people pay for medicines. Countries need to review all policies and practices that affect medicine prices and availability.

"We now have evidence" said Margaret Ewen "what we need is government action".

The full article is available at [http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(08\)61762-6/fulltext#article_upsell](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(08)61762-6/fulltext#article_upsell)

The article is also available on the HAI Medicine Prices website www.haiweb.org/medicineprices

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The WHO/HAI survey methodology measures medicine prices, availability, affordability and price components in the supply chain. To date, more than 50 surveys have been conducted by investigators around the world. All of the survey results and related information are available on the HAI website: www.haiweb.org/medicineprices



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