

***THIS DAY* (Nigeria): On the High Cost of Medicines**

The following article, published in 'This Day' on 20 August 2007, comments on the findings of a price and availability survey conducted by the Nigerian Federal Ministry of Health in 2004, using the WHO/HAI methodology. Price and availability data was collected for 34 prescription medicines, across 129 facilities in the public and private sectors in 6 states in the country.

It is an unsettling irony that in a country plagued by all kinds of diseases and with a measly average personal income, simple medications are so expensive to buy. This long standing tragedy has been confirmed by a recent World Health Organisation (WHO) report that rates Nigeria as one of the eight countries in the world with exceptionally exorbitant drug prices. The international health agency is worried, as all well-meaning Nigerians should, about the implication of this for health care delivery.

The first thing to be said about this disconcerting report is that it indicts the Nigerian government as one that is insensitive to the health care needs of the people. The WHO report shows that as many as 90.2 per cent of Nigerians who live on less than N256 a day and government workers who earn a minimum wage of N179.40 daily, cannot afford essential drugs. This, of course, includes simple medications for the treatment of common diseases like fever, malaria and other variants of it so common in the country. For the millions of Nigerians who fall within this bracket, the implication of this high cost of medicines is better experienced than imagined. There is such a grim possibility that most of such people had never had the opportunity of taking any pharmaceutical drugs because they cannot afford them. It is no wonder then that patronage of herbal potions prepared in less than healthy environments and with doubtful therapeutic value is so widespread in the country.

As the WHO aptly noted, medicine prices are important because most Nigerians purchase their medicines out of pocket. Thus high medicine prices would constitute a major barrier to access to health care. That is putting it starkly. The truth is that most Nigerians depend on self-medication for simple common ailments. When it becomes difficult for them to afford medicines for the treatment of such ailments, it would only spell doom for many families. In many instances, a number of them have simply resigned themselves to fate while others passed away, just because they could not afford to buy their common pills or pay for the doctors prescription. Which ever way this is viewed, it is a sad commentary on governance in the country.

What then is the way out of this embarrassment? We agree with the WHO that the government needs to review the nations drug procurement policy, without necessarily compromising standards. The National Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC), should consider prices before issuing marketing authorization to manufacturers and importers. This is crucial because there is evidence that a good number of them exploit consumers through profiteering. The NAFDACs role should not be to merely check fake and substandard products but also to ensure that drugs are sold at reasonably affordable prices.

There is also the need for government to take another look at the tariffs on pharmaceuticals. It is possible that they are not friendly enough to good pricing in this vital sector. Where that is the case, the government should not hesitate to review them downward. Local manufacturers need also to enjoy favourable excise duties and lower tariffs on raw materials. All of this may lead to a significant reduction in drug prices. Without easy access to affordable and genuine drugs by Nigerians, the nations health care system is imperilled. We see no reason why generic medicines should be too expensive for an average Nigerian. If it requires that government should subsidize such drugs, why not. That sort of sacrifice can never be too much for the health of the people.

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