

# The cost of homoeopathy in Scotland

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**ABSTRACT** Homoeopathy is a popular form of complementary medicine which is prescribed by 60% of Scottish GPs on the NHS. The aims of this study were, using the PRISMS database, to determine the number of homoeopathic prescriptions issued by Scottish community pharmacies on an NHS prescription, and the associated net ingredient costs over the last five years. In 2005, 48,778 homoeopathic prescriptions were dispensed in Scotland at an ingredient cost of £254,704 (excluding consultation and dispensing fees). During the study period the number of dispensed homoeopathic prescriptions fell by 9%, however the total ingredient costs increased by 28%. Although the amounts spent by the Scottish NHS on homoeopathy are relatively small, with the ever-increasing financial constraints, and demands for the use of cost-effective therapies with proven efficacy, it would seem appropriate to reconsider the position of homoeopathy in the Scottish health service.

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**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS** Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), general practitioner (GP), gross ingredient cost (GIC), Information and Statistics Division (ISD), Prescribing Information System for Scotland (PRISMS)

**DECLARATION OF INTERESTS** JS McLay is the Principal Investigator for studies for Merk, Sharp & Dohme, Astra Zeneca.

## INTRODUCTION

Despite public demand, several new and expensive drugs have been rejected by the Scottish Medicines Consortium and NICE on the basis of a lack of cost effectiveness.<sup>1</sup> Such decisions clearly bring into question the spending on, and the use of, other unproven treatments, including CAM within the NHS.

Homoeopathy is an increasingly popular form of complementary medicine, which, despite no good evidence of clinical benefit<sup>2–4</sup> or cost effectiveness,<sup>5,6</sup> is prescribed on an NHS prescription by 60% of Scottish GPs.<sup>7</sup> Having said this however, some practitioners believe that the placebo value of homoeopathy may provide an inexpensive way of treating minor and self-limiting illnesses,<sup>3,8</sup> although there is little data to support this view. Despite being the only CAM which may be prescribed on an NHS prescription throughout the UK, there is at present little data available on the cost of homoeopathy to the NHS. In this brief study we report on the ingredient costs of homoeopathic remedies prescribed by Scottish GPs on an NHS prescription during 2005.

## AIM

To determine the number of NHS prescriptions, and ingredient cost of homoeopathic remedies prescribed by Scottish GPs and dispensed in the community during 2005.

## METHODS

The number and cost of dispensed homoeopathic prescriptions for 2005 are available to the public as summary data on the ISD for Scotland website.<sup>9</sup> The initial figures we obtained from this source for both the number of prescriptions and the ingredient cost, however, appeared unexpectedly low when compared with local dispensing data obtained from the PRISMS database for the same period. Discussions with ISD identified two major reasons for the apparent discrepancies; firstly, prescription recording in the UK does not record any medicinal item where the total number of prescriptions dispensed in the year is fewer than 50; secondly, any medicine not found on the Prescription Pricing item master file is automatically processed as a 'dummy item', and so not recorded under the correct heading of homoeopathy. Because homoeopathic practitioners can prescribe more than 1,500 different preparations, it is likely that both factors will play a major role in contributing to a significant underestimate of the true levels of homoeopathic prescribing and resultant costs. Allowing for these two sources of error, a further analysis of the PRISMS database was performed for the years 2001–2005, and all dispensed prescriptions for formulations classified as homoeopathic were identified. This dataset was then used to assess the number of prescriptions and the net ingredient cost.

| Calendar Year | No of Prescriptions Dispensed (enhanced) | Gross Ingredient Cost (£) | Cost per Item (£) |
|---------------|--|---------------------------|-------------------|
| 2001          | 53,617                                   | 198,908.13                | 3.71              |
| 2002          | 53,414                                   | 214,551.14                | 4.02              |
| 2003          | 48,741                                   | 228,125.28                | 4.68              |
| 2004          | 48,347                                   | 238,932.21                | 4.94              |
| 2005          | 48,778                                   | 254,704.13                | 5.22              |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>2,528,973</b>                         | <b>1,135,220.89</b>       | <b>4.49</b>       |

**TABLE 1** Number of homoeopathic prescriptions dispensed and GIC per year. Data from PRISMS analysis provided by ISD for years 2001–2006.

## RESULTS

The original figures on the ISD website<sup>9</sup> suggested that only 29,196 homoeopathic items, at a cost of £125,257, were prescribed by GPs in Scotland in 2005. Data from the PRISMS dataset confirmed this to be an underestimate by approximately 50%. Following discussions, ISD provided a second modified dataset which confirmed that during 2005, 48,778 homoeopathic prescriptions were dispensed at an ingredient cost of £254,704, or approximately 0.03% of the total ingredient expenditure on prescribed items for that year.

Over the five year study period (see Table 1) the total ingredient cost for homoeopathic medicines increased by 28% while the number of dispensed homoeopathic items fell by 9%. The top items in terms of individual ingredient cost were mistletoe injection (£56–£83), calendula (£18), valeriana (£14), and colcynthis (£13). The top five items in terms of NHS expenditure for homoeopathic prescribing in the community are shown in table 2. The largest single cost item was mistletoe injection, used as an anthroposophic remedy for cancer in herbal rather than homoeopathic strength, but treated, for the purpose of pricing, as a homoeopathic remedy by prescribers, dispensers and health boards.

## DISCUSSION

In 2005, approximately 49,000 NHS prescriptions for homoeopathic remedies were issued by Scottish GPs,

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| Approved Drug Name | Formulation | No of Prescription Items Dispensed | Gross Ingredient Cost (£) |
|--------------------|-------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Mistletoe          | All         | 348                                | 24,339.99                 |
| Rhus Toxicodendron | Tabs        | 3,000                              | 9,038.14                  |
| Arnica             | Cream       | 1,548                              | 7,503.13                  |
| Colocynthis        | All         | 1,915                              | 6,797.79                  |
| Cuprum Metallicum  | Tabs        | 2,224                              | 6,512.95                  |

**TABLE 2** Top 5 Homoeopathic remedies by gross ingredient cost in 2005. Data from PRISMS analysis provided by ISD for 2005.

with a total ingredient cost of £255,000. This equates to approximately 0.03% of the total Scottish expenditure on prescribed items. This figure however does not include dispensing fee, cost of the GP consultation, or the cost of homoeopathic medicines dispensed directly from a hospital pharmacy. The single most expensive item prescribed was mistletoe, which although an herbal, is currently classified by the pricing bureau as an homoeopathic remedy, thus bypassing the restrictions on GP prescribing of herbals in the community.

During 2005, in England, approximately 83,000 homoeopathic prescriptions, with an ingredient cost of approximately £590,000 were dispensed,<sup>10</sup> indicating an approximate six-fold greater use of homoeopathy *per capita* in Scotland. However, the figures for England are subject to the same sources of error as those in Scotland, suggesting that actual prescription number and expenditure in England is likely to be closer to 160,000 and £1,000,000 per year respectively.

Although the absolute amounts spent by the NHS on homoeopathy are relatively small, at a time when there are ever-increasing financial constraints on the NHS, and demands for the use of cost effective therapies with proven benefit, it would seem appropriate to reconsider both the cost and therapeutic value of homoeopathy to the health service.