

Generic Medicines and lower prices!

Most members of the public do not have a clear idea of what the term generic constitutes when applied to the context of medicinal products. This short article aims to correct this lack of information, and also provide points on how a Maltese consumer can obtain the therapeutic benefits provided by modern medicines whilst saving on expenditure.

A generic medicinal product is a version of a previously patented (that is protected by a monopoly licence) medicine, that is identical to it in composition and action. In most cases the generic product is cheaper than the originator product. Locally, one can draw comparisons between the prices of generic paracetamol (€ 2 per 100) and the branded version (€ 1.61 per 24).

A generic version is just as safe and effective as the originator and passes all the minimum quality requirements that are demanded by the European Medicines Agency (EMA), and also the Malta Medicines Authority. Maltese legislation allows brand substitution of prescribed products unless the physician expressly prohibits this on the script. In certain cases a pharmacist is morally obliged to point out the availability of cheaper alternatives to the patient, as the savings can be substantial. For example, in the case of a particular proton pump inhibitor (for stomach acidity), the variance between the originator and generic for a six-month prescribed course from Mater Dei General Hospital is a whopping € 277!

Not all generic drugs provide savings of the magnitude described above, and in certain cases the difference may not be significant enough to warrant changing brand, especially in the case of chronic medication and elderly patients. However it is imperative that the patient is aware of the existence of equivalent and cheaper alternatives, as this will increase the access of the general public to pharmaceutical treatment and lead to a better quality of life. No patient should object to paying a high price for a newly discovered and cutting edge drug treatment; on the other hand, it is every patient's and Maltese citizen's right to have access to the same treatment at much reduced prices once the monopoly period of manufacture has expired.

All patients have the right to demand the existence of an alternative medicine, and if this is available, take the decision on whether or not to migrate to a more cost-effective healthcare solution. The role of the pharmacist is to point out the existence of such alternatives, and provide professional and unbiased advice on the best treatment option to be chosen, as cheaper is not always necessarily better.