



The Consumer Healthcare Association

PAGB's State of the Nation report:

Realising the potential of self-care and over-the-counter medicines for patients, the NHS and the economy



Executive summary

The NHS is under unprecedented and increasing pressures, especially when it comes to its “front door”: primary care and emergency departments. Rising patient demand – exacerbated by the backlog and waiting lists for NHS services as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic – has not been matched by available GP appointments, causing issues throughout the system. The public’s concern for addressing these issues is at an all-time high¹ and it is therefore vital that as the Government shapes plans for the NHS, it prioritises policies that do so.

Policies that prioritise self-care and access to over-the-counter (OTC) medicines are key to reducing this burden on the front door of the NHS, with at least 25 million GP appointments and 5 million A&E visits each year used for self-treatable illnesses, such as headaches, colds, allergies and indigestion.² If the individuals using these appointments were empowered to self-care using over-the-counter medicines instead, it could save the NHS at least £1.7bn per year in costs.²

Health policies that prioritise self-care can support the Government’s ambition to see the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) become an economic growth department. Eliminating appointments used for self-treatable illnesses could save the economy an additional £350m per year as employees would not need to take time out from work for unnecessary NHS treatment.²

The case for OTC usage and self-care is clear and has become increasingly recognised by the public, the healthcare system and the professional community. There has been a notable shift in policy towards promoting the role of pharmacy, expanding access to OTC medicines and encouraging self-care. This policy shift was welcomed, however, there is still work to be done. As we move into a new era of Labour Government, and as the 10-year plan for the NHS is being developed, it is vital that we maintain this momentum and ensure people are empowered and supported to access the right care, in the right place and at the right time.

This report has been developed to support the Government to shape policy around self-care and access to OTC medicines. It explores the progress to realising the potential of self-care and OTC medicines and sets out recommendations for the Government to action, with a focus on two key areas: public empowerment to self-care and patient access to OTC products.

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Exploring the current state of self-care and OTC medicines, this report aims to support the Government by setting out key policy recommendations to action as part of this planning.

Introduction

The potential of self-care and OTC medicines for patients, the NHS and the wider economy

Self-care comprises the actions that individuals take for themselves, on behalf of and with others to protect, maintain and improve their health, wellbeing and wellness. It does not mean 'no care', but rather it is an important, although often overlooked, part of the primary care pathway. While self-care can be described as a continuum, ranging from encouraging healthy living to hospital-based care, for the purposes of this report, self-care is defined as actions taken to treat minor and self-treatable conditions.

Over-the-counter (OTC) medicines and consumer medical devices are products that are available without a prescription, allowing people to treat self-treatable conditions and minor ailments appropriately and effectively, without burdening the NHS.

Reclassification is the process by which medicines change categories to be available OTC. The aim of reclassification is to maximise timely access to effective medicines, whilst minimising the risk of harm from inappropriate use.

In the UK, the legal classification of a medicine determines the level of control over its supply (e.g. where it can be purchased/quantities that can be purchased). There are three categories that a medicine can be classified within:

- **Prescription-Only Medicine (POM)** – which has to be prescribed by a doctor or another authorised healthcare professional and must be dispensed from a pharmacy or another specifically licensed place
- **Pharmacy (P)** – which can be bought only under a pharmacist's supervision within a pharmacy
- **General Sales List (GSL)** – which can be bought from retail stores, such as newsagents, supermarkets or vending machines in a shop

Self-treatable conditions – such as colds, indigestion, headaches, allergies and insect bites and stings – are commonplace. They affect the entire population, with over two-thirds of adults experiencing three or more self-treatable conditions in the last year.³

Self-care can be a quick and convenient avenue for the public to take to address these conditions. Despite this, each year at least **25 million GP appointments and 5 million A&E visits are used for these self-treatable illnesses.**² If the individuals using these appointments were empowered to self-care using OTC medicines instead, **it could save the NHS at least £1.7bn per year in costs.**² **Eliminating these appointments could also save the economy an additional £350m per year** as employees would not need to take time out from work for unnecessary NHS treatment.²

As identified in a ground-breaking [Frontier Economics report](#) on the value of the OTC sector, commissioned by PAGB, OTC products can also provide savings for the NHS and wider economy beyond those associated with unnecessary NHS appointments, including:

£6.4bn annual NHS savings from avoided prescription costs

£1.4bn that could be saved by a 5% reduction in NHS prescribing from reclassification

£18bn annual savings, by reducing absenteeism and avoiding productivity losses

Maintaining momentum in the self-care landscape

In 2001, the Labour Government of the time set out to increase access to OTC medicines, through the establishment of a Reclassification Alliance that pushed forward a 'switch' agenda and successfully reclassified 50 medicines from prescription-only to OTC. In 2005, the Government went on to publish a self-care strategy to guide the NHS on self-care and how to empower people to use it.⁴ Yet, following the publication of the strategy, there was a significant gap in policies that promoted and enabled self-care.

Fast-forward to 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic, self-care was back on the agenda, becoming fundamental to the Government's message of "stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives".⁵ The pandemic also improved understanding of the importance of self-care, shifting public attitudes and behaviours. A [PAGB survey in 2020](#) found that seven in ten people who would not have considered self-care as their first option before the pandemic, were now more likely.⁶

Self-care also became central to efforts addressing the backlog and waiting lists that resulted from the pandemic, with self-care and pharmacy central to the Government and NHS England's (NHSE) 2023 'Delivery plan for recovering access to primary care'.⁷ The plan incorporated numerous England-wide measures to address concerns about primary care capacity following the COVID-19 pandemic, with new programmes and initiatives, including those aimed at supporting effective self-care through improved community pharmacy utilisation. This plan saw widened access to medicines from pharmacy – through reclassification as well as increased pharmacist prescribing powers – and steps to integrate pharmacy further into primary care.⁸

These policies and the progress since the pandemic are welcome and have continued to improve the public's attitude towards self-care, with almost four out of five adults in 2024 suggesting they would choose self-care as their first healthcare option.³ We must continue to capitalise on the momentum of this progress in order to fully realise the potential of self-care and OTC medicines.

With this in mind, PAGB welcomed the Government's manifesto commitments to take pressure off GP surgeries by "improving access to services and treatment through new routes" and to expand the role of pharmacists.⁹ We were also pleased to see the role of self-care and pharmacy recognised in the recent report from Lord Darzi's investigation of the NHS England.¹⁰ As the new Government reflects on the review and sets out its plans to deliver on these commitments and fix the "broken" NHS – including through the development of the 10-year plan – it is vital that policies to widen access to OTC medicines and empower people to self-care are prioritised. Exploring the current state of self-care and OTC medicines, this report aims to support the Government by setting out key policy recommendations to action as part of this planning.

PAGB welcomed the Government's manifesto commitments to take pressures off GP surgeries by "improving access to services and treatment through new routes" and to expand the role of pharmacists.⁹

Summary of recommendations

Public empowerment to self-care

Recommendation 1:

The Government should ensure that NHSE launch a dedicated self-care 'hub' on the NHS App and website, building on existing NHS website hubs on mental health and women's health,^{11,12} utilising support from industry

Recommendation 2:

The Government must uphold the recently proposed addition to the RHSE curriculum that: self-care for minor ailments, and the role of pharmacists as knowledgeable healthcare professionals be covered by the end of secondary school

Recommendation 3:

The Government must work with NHSE and professional organisations to publish guidelines and training on good clinical navigation for all staff that interact with patients in primary care

Recommendation 4:

The Government should collaborate with NHSE to launch a sustained nationwide campaign to enhance public awareness of comprehensive primary care services. The campaign should utilise existing industry information and expertise to prioritise the importance and methods of accessing trusted self-care advice and inform the public about the broader services pharmacists can provide and the conditions they can give advice on

The case for OTC usage and self-care is clear and has become increasingly recognised by the public, the healthcare system and the professional community.

Summary of recommendations

Patient access to OTC products

Recommendation 5:

The Government should work with the Reclassification Alliance to explore opportunities to widen the use of 25 OTC products over 5 years (including widening the conditions they can be used to treat and/or the quantity it's available in) to expand access to self-care

Recommendation 6:

The Government should work with the MHRA to re-evaluate the restrictive criteria for switching a POM to OTC to allow timely access to effective treatments (e.g. injectables to treat life-threatening allergic reactions)

Recommendation 7:

The Government must put in place policies to incentivise the OTC sector to reclassify their products in the UK to retain our position as a world-leader in reclassification of medicines

Recommendation 8:

The Government and MHRA should prioritise open and collaborative partnerships with industry, to ensure the UK remains an attractive destination for the OTC sector to innovate

Recommendation 9:

The Government and MHRA should ensure OTC products are considered as part of innovative schemes to encourage access to medicine

Recommendation 10:

The Government must optimise grant and funding opportunities for small and medium OTC sector businesses

Recommendation 11:

The Government must agree a long-term funding settlement for community pharmacy that reflects pharmacy's role in supporting NHS delivery - and ensures patient access to and advice on OTC medicines

Realising the potential of self-care and OTC medicines

Public empowerment to self-care

Public recognition of the benefits of self-care is increasing, with **77% agreeing that people need to take more responsibility for their own health to ease the burden on the NHS**, and **76% of adults saying they see their pharmacist as a trusted health information source**. Despite this, public confidence to self-care has dropped in the years following the pandemic, with **only 52% of adults visiting a pharmacy as a first step for medical advice for a self-treatable condition (down from 69% in 2022)**.³ This shows a clear disconnect between understanding the value of self-care and being empowered to use it.

Educating the public about self-treatable conditions

Education and awareness are key to empowering people to self-care and to addressing this disconnect. Current information and guidance on self-care, however, is limited. [PAGB's 2024 census](#) on self-care found that a third of people from lower income households do not feel they have access to enough information to self-care.³ To close this gap and ensure everyone is equipped to choose self-care, there is a need for improved information and guidance for the public.

The public supports these calls, with **54% of adults believing that it is the responsibility of the secondary schools to provide self-care education**, and **64% suggesting that it is the NHS's responsibility to educate the public about self-care**.

NHS digital tools

Digital tools are an integral resource in providing information and guidance on self-care to the public, with **59% of adults using the internet to look up symptoms of self-treatable conditions** that they experience.³ However, the challenge can be finding accurate and trustworthy information amongst the sheer volume of online resources available. **40% of adults say they feel overwhelmed by the volume of digital information on self-care and are unsure what information they can believe**.³

With over 33 million registered users of the NHS App and approximately 23 million monthly visits to the NHS website,¹³ the NHS digital toolkit presents an excellent opportunity to provide trustworthy, accurate and helpful information on self-care to a large portion of the population. As highlighted in the Darzi review, despite this potential, the NHS App, in particular, is not delivering a 'digital first' experience similar to that found in other aspects of daily life. The Delivery plan for recovering access to primary care highlighted the importance of these tools and made commitments to improving the functionality of the NHS App and expanding the information available on the NHS website, including on local services and women's health. While these are welcome and positive steps in the right direction, PAGB's 2023 audit of NHS digital services found that there remain gaps in the information and guidance on self-care.⁸ For example, to find information on self-treatable conditions, users must search through an extensive alphabetised list of conditions. To sufficiently direct people on how and where to access self-care, further updates to the NHS digital toolkit are needed.

OTC brands have built trust and loyalty with their consumers by ensuring access to reliable, accurate and useful information, with **73% of adults noting that they trust health information from OTC brand websites**.³ There is an opportunity for the NHS to leverage these existing resources to ensure that the information, guidance and content offered through its digital channels is engaging and trustworthy – something that industry is keen to support with.

Recommendation 1:

The Government should ensure that NHSE launch a dedicated self-care 'hub' on the NHS App and website, building on existing NHS website hubs on mental health and women's health,^{11,12} utilising support from industry

Self-care education in school

The gap in self-care knowledge is particularly stark in the younger generation. **Over a third of those aged 18-24 report not having enough information on self-care treatments, compared to only a quarter of those over 65.**³ To address this, there is a clear opportunity to provide information and guidance on self-care as part of the school curriculum. The recent inclusion of self-care in the 2024 draft statutory guidance for teaching relationships, sex and health education (RSHE) guidance was therefore a welcome first step.

Recommendation 2:

The Government must uphold the recently proposed addition to the RHSE curriculum that: self-care for minor ailments, and the role of pharmacists as knowledgeable healthcare professionals be covered by the end of secondary school

Signposting in the new primary care landscape

With the increased role of pharmacy in primary care provision – including the widened prescribing powers through the Pharmacy First scheme – and the recent push of the self-care agenda, the primary care landscape has evolved. In order for the public to be able to engage with the NHS effectively, it is vital that the landscape and evolving nature of primary care is explained and made clear to the public.

The Delivery plan for recovering access to primary care recognised the need for this information, with welcome interventions by the NHS to improve public understanding of the primary care system and signpost them to the most appropriate setting for their healthcare needs, including pharmacy for self-care. These initiatives, however, have limitations in scope that must be addressed.

The National Care Navigation Training Programme (NCNTP)

The NCNTP was rolled out in 2024 to help staff in General Practice improve their awareness of changes to the primary care system, including Pharmacy First, and how and when to refer or recommend patients towards the most appropriate setting for their condition.¹⁴ This rollout was a positive step forward, however, training is only available for GP practice staff. Given the range of healthcare professionals and non-clinical staff that patients interact with across Primary Care Networks, it is vital that training is provided to all potential-patient facing staff. This could avoid missed opportunities during patient interactions and improve knowledge within communities of how local services have changed and how to access them.

Recommendation 3:

The Government must work with NHSE and professional organisations to publish guidelines and training on good clinical navigation for all staff that interact with patients in primary care

Pharmacy First information campaign

In February 2024, NHSE ran a campaign to raise awareness of the newly launched Pharmacy First scheme.¹⁵ The campaign, that ran nationally for two months, used radio, TV and social media to inform people about the conditions for which pharmacies can provide treatment, as well as the additional services pharmacies can provide. While the impact of the Pharmacy First information campaign has yet to be assessed, the short two-month running time risks minimising its impact on behavioural change. Moreover, the campaign missed an opportunity to signpost to the broader roles and services that pharmacies can provide, including blood pressure checks, oral contraception and smoking cessation.

Recommendation 4:

The Government should collaborate with NHSE to launch a sustained nationwide campaign to enhance public awareness of comprehensive primary care services. The campaign should utilise existing industry information and expertise to prioritise the importance and methods of accessing trusted self-care advice and inform the public about the broader services pharmacists can provide and the conditions they can give advice on

Realising the potential of self-care and OTC medicines

Patient access to OTC products

In order for people to use self-care – and in turn reduce pressures on primary care and A&E departments – access to OTC products is paramount. Widening access to OTC products and self-care will further increase primary care capacity and bring increased savings to the NHS and economy. Moreover, it is what people want, with **3 in 4 adults (74%) wanting more medicines available from pharmacy without a prescription.**³

There are two main avenues for safely widening access to medicines from pharmacy without a prescription: the reclassification of medicines from prescription-only to OTC, and the research, development and manufacturing of new OTC products and consumer medical devices.

Continuing to lead the way in reclassification

The aim of reclassification is to maximise timely access to effective medicines, while minimising the risk of harm from inappropriate use. As well as contributing to the wider impact of self-care on individuals, the NHS and the economy, increased reclassification provides its own direct savings to the NHS. **A report commissioned by PAGB on the value of the OTC sector estimates that a 5% reduction in NHS prescribing due to reclassification could save £1.4bn in avoidable NHS costs per year.**²

For over 40 years, the UK has led the way in reclassification, from the first switches in 1983, the success of the Labour Government's Reclassification Alliance and its delivery of 50 switches, to the recent renewed ambitions for identifying further opportunities for switching medicines and widening OTC access, as set out in the Delivery plan for recovering access to primary care. As part of these renewed ambitions, PAGB has worked with the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) to establish a new Reclassification Alliance to replicate previous successes and identify therapeutic areas where there are opportunities for reclassification. Building on Labour's own legacy, PAGB is eager to advance this crucial work with the Government to empower patients to access treatments and self-care conveniently.

Recommendation 5:

The Government should work with the Reclassification Alliance to explore opportunities to widen the use of 25 OTC products over 5 years (including widening the conditions they can be used to treat and/or the quantity it's available in) to expand access to self-care

Recommendation 6:

The Government should work with the MHRA to re-evaluate the restrictive criteria for switching a POM to OTC to allow timely access to effective treatments (e.g. injectables to treat life-threatening allergic reactions)

Recommendation 7:

The Government must put in place policies to incentivise the OTC sector to reclassify their products in the UK to retain our position as a world-leader in reclassification of medicines

Ensuring a favourable life sciences environment for new OTC products

The OTC market in the UK is substantial, contributing £3.5bn to the UK economy each year, including over £2.8bn from exporting manufactured products and £600m in OTC sector workers' wages.² In order for the OTC sector to continue this investment and bring their new products to the UK market to widen self-care capabilities, it is vital that the life sciences environment be attractive and supportive.

The UK's departure from the European Union (EU) provided an excellent opportunity for the UK to ensure an agile, innovative and world leading regulatory regime that protects patients and the public, while facilitating access and investment in the UK. Yet, with the legislation and regulation underpinning all its work requiring transference to UK law, along with inadequate funding and workforce capacity shortages, PAGB members have reported significant challenges with lengthy and unpredictable processes.

Labour's 2024 election pledges, to unblock the regulatory regime and create a Regulatory Innovation Office to hold regulators to account, are therefore welcomed. PAGB is eager to work with the Government to explore how this work in practice for the OTC sector.

Recommendation 8:

The Government and MHRA should prioritise open and collaborative partnerships with industry, to ensure the UK remains an attractive destination for the OTC sector to innovate

Recommendation 9:

The Government and MHRA should ensure OTC products are considered as part of innovative schemes to encourage access to medicine

Recommendation 10:

The Government must optimise grant and funding opportunities for small and medium OTC sector businesses

Ensuring pharmacies can deliver access to OTC products

Community pharmacies are central to providing access to OTC medicines and self-care more widely. Crucially, pharmacists also provide advice on OTC medicines use and self-care, which is key to enabling reclassification in many cases. However, patient access to pharmacies is under threat, with – as recognised by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care – an increase in community pharmacy closures. **In the 12 months ending in April 2024, there were 432 pharmacy closures, leaving just 10,117 pharmacies on the high street.**¹⁶ Rising lease and medicine costs on account of inflation, combined with significant real-terms funding cuts of 30% since 2015,¹⁷ are contributing to this, making community pharmacies increasingly unprofitable.

Recommendation 11:

The Government must agree a long-term funding settlement for community pharmacy that reflects pharmacy's role in supporting NHS delivery - and ensures patient access to and advice on OCT medicines

Conclusion

In recent years, there has been excellent progress in realising the benefits of self-care and OTC medicines for supporting patients and the NHS. As part of this, PAGB, the leading voice for the OTC sector, is proud to have worked closely with past-Governments to help advance the self-care policy agenda and widen access to OTC medicines. The success of the work to date is evident, but we must capitalise and build on this momentum in order for the benefits to be felt in full.

With that in mind, PAGB is eager to work with the new Government to share its expertise and advise on how OTC medicines and policies on self-care can help address the challenges facing primary care and the wider NHS.

If you would be interested in a meeting to discuss self-care and OTC medicines further, please contact Farhana Hawthorn (she/her), Head of Public Affairs and Communications at farhana.hawthorn@pagb.co.uk.

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