Prescrire International Editorial

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Generics: just who can be trusted?

Generic drugs are a frequent source of controversy, rumour and suspicion. Some believe that generics are less effective or less safe than original brand-name drugs because they are said to contain a different amount of active ingredient or to have a different formulation, including riskier excipients. And generics must be of inferior quality since they are manufactured in Asia. Not to mention the "fact" that generics stifle therapeutic innovation.

Anecdotes, false truths, unfounded beliefs and misconceptions about generics are bandied about by some drug companies, healthcare professionals, the media and certain scientific societies. How can we separate myths from reality?

Leaving aside rumour and opinion, let's examine the facts. First, generics are subject to marketing authorisation, manufacturing controls and pharmacovigilance, in the same way as original brand-name drugs. Second, generics are used throughout the world, including the wealthiest and most highly industrialised countries (see page 52 of this issue). Third, generics are required to meet internationally defined criteria of efficacy and quality, such as bioequivalence with the originator drug, a property that guarantees similar efficacy.

Generics can represent an important source of savings for national healthcare systems, without undermining quality of care.

It's also worth remembering that patients are not cured by brands but rather by active ingredients prepared and packaged in an appropriate form. It does not matter whether a drug is a generic or an original brand, provided it meets the same quality standards. And when several medicines are equivalent, it makes sense to choose the least expensive.

It is up to physicians and pharmacists to choose the medicine, generic or original brand, that is best suited to each patient, taking into account the individual's condition, age, lifestyle and the risk of errors. Prescriptions should be written using the international nonproprietary name (INN), and the dosage form, packaging, and flavour should be taken into account.

It is essential to discuss each phase of treatment with the patient, family members or carers in order to identify and understand specific expectations or concerns and to deal with questions and reservations. Finally, whenever possible, the same medicine, whether it is an original brand or a generic, should be used throughout a given course of treatment.

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