

Experience with generic medicines in Italy: a questionnaire-based survey of prescribers, pharmacists and patients

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Background. Despite several initiatives to promote generic medicines, data on drug utilisation show that their use in Italy is still very low in comparison with Western Countries: in 2013, it accounted for 29% of total drug expenditure and 36% of volume of off-patent medicines.

Our aim was to analyse obstacles to increasing generic consumption by collecting the views of all subjects involved: prescribers, pharmacists and patients.

Methods. A web-based questionnaire on experience with generic use was delivered to prescribers and pharmacists; patients were directly interviewed in pharmacies. Each questionnaire contained information on frequency of generic use, reasons for use/non-use, factors influencing attitude toward generic use. Language was adapted to the specific category of interviewed subjects.

Results. A total of 521, 444 and 797 questionnaires were filled out by prescribers, pharmacists and patients, respectively. All Italian geographical areas were represented.

Ninety-five percent of patients indicated that they were informed on generic medicines, 71% declared that they used them and more than half of these reported that most of their medicines were generics. The advice to use / not to use generics was mainly from pharmacists in case of patients aged <60 (39-43%), and from prescribers in case of older people (38%). Reasons reported by patients for refusing to take any generic medicines were indicated as general lack of trust for 47% of the cases, experience of lack of efficacy or occurrence of side effects for 22%, advice against generics by prescribers, friends or media for 18%.

The pharmacists' responses to the survey indicated that around 70% of prescriptions reported a brand name and among these around 50% reported a generic brand name, with minor differences between reimbursed and non-reimbursed medicines. Patients accepted the generic medicines proposed by pharmacists in 55% of cases.

The main reasons for prescribers' preference of drugs marketed by patent originators were: seriousness of disease and comorbidities (22%), specific disease (18%, primarily for epilepsy), cognitive impairment (15%), and older age (12%).

Discussion. All three subject groups have a role in limiting generic use and their views must be carefully taken into account to understand the phenomenon, which, in Italy, seems to be based on prejudice rather than actual negative experience with generics. Age, clinical condition and therapeutic indications play important roles in influencing prescription of generics: physically frail persons tended to receive generic prescriptions less frequently. The fact that increased use of generics implies savings not only for the national health service, but also for citizens should prompt initiatives by regulatory agencies and manufacturers to increase the confidence in generics.