

Prescription charges

Prescription charges can act as a barrier to treatment and contribute to inequalities in health. Each year in Scotland, 75,000 prescriptions are not dispensed due to cost increases which make them unaffordable.¹ Unhealthy Charges, a 2001 report by Citizens Advice England and Wales, showed that:

- 50% of clients who had paid prescription charges reported difficulties in affording the charge
- 28% of clients had failed to get all or part of a prescription dispensed during the previous year because the cost was prohibitive
- People with long-term health problems were particularly affected, with 37% failing to get all or part of their prescriptions dispensed.

Problems faced by CAB clients

The current system for exemption from prescription charges is complex and highly inconsistent. It therefore creates a burden that falls disproportionately on those suffering from ill health and/or on low incomes, further penalising already vulnerable people. Our case evidence points to two overarching issues with the current system:

- Some people with very low incomes or serious illnesses do not qualify for exemption and struggle to meet their prescription costs. For instance, those in receipt of Incapacity Benefit do not automatically qualify, even though they can reasonably be assumed to have higher than average health costs
- The system is hard to understand, meaning that some clients incorrectly believe they are exempt and unwittingly claim free prescriptions that they are not entitled to. These unintentionally fraudulent claims can result in punitive fines.

¹ Review of NHS Prescription Charges and Exemption Arrangements - The UNISON Scotland Response, April 2006

Sick CAB clients on low incomes cannot afford prescription charges, meaning they must make tough financial choices between their health and other necessities

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Prescription charges and CAB clients

Issues relating to health, sickness and disability account for a significant proportion of the enquiries brought to Scotland's bureaux. In 2004/05, clients brought 4,859 new enquiries about health issues, 14,918 enquiries about sickness benefits and 26,392 enquiries about disability benefits.

The inequities present in the current system of prescription charges and exemptions are of particular concern to the Scottish CAB service because:

- One in five people using the service has a disability or long-term illness
- The recent CAS research project, On the Cards, found that of the debt clients interviewed, 33% highlighted illness or disability as a reason for their debt problem
- Sick or disabled people are disproportionately more likely to be in debt - whilst 6% of the Scottish population as a whole is sick or disabled, 19% of Scottish CAB debt clients are sick or disabled.

Current concerns

Case evidence highlights a number of specific issues in relation to prescription charges:

- The basic prescription charge is currently £6.50. Even as a one-off payment this can be a significant amount for a client on a low income.
- The problem of affordability is exacerbated for people who require multiple and/or repeat prescriptions. This can mean that people on low incomes and with chronic, complex or severe health conditions are the ones who are most affected by the current system of charging
- Some clients report being able to afford some but not all of their prescriptions. They are therefore forced into the position of prioritising their own illnesses and treatments
- The help afforded by the NHS low income scheme is withdrawn as soon as the person's income rises above income support level. Support is not tapered, so that at this cut-off point people become liable for all their prescription costs
- Pre-payment certificates that effectively cap the cost of prescriptions for a time-limited period are not accessible for clients on low budgets, as they require payment upfront.

CAS calls for change

Evidence suggests a strong argument in favour of reform of prescription charges.

- CAS therefore welcomes the Scottish Executive's consultation on the subject, and would like to see a significant change in the system of charges for those with chronic illness or disability and those on low incomes. The present system places a disproportionate burden on these two often overlapping client groups and it is difficult to see how this can be properly addressed unless they are exempted from prescription charges
- We also believe that the Department for Work and Pension's current focus on welfare reform provides an ideal opportunity to ensure that the additional support provided by passported benefits is available to everyone on low income, regardless of whether they are claiming income support or incapacity benefits.

Case evidence

|| An East of Scotland CAB reports of a female client who has one child aged 11. The client has multiple debt problems and is on medication for long term depression. Her income support has been stopped and she cannot afford the prescription charges. She had been without medication for three days and was feeling withdrawal effects.

|| A West of Scotland CAB reports of a male client in receipt of statutory sick pay following a stroke. He had several illnesses all of which required medication, amounting to prescription charges of approximately £40 per month. The client was having difficulty in meeting these costs. However, he was not entitled to free prescriptions as he was not in receipt of a qualifying benefit or diagnosed with an illness included in the list for automatic exemption.

|| An East of Scotland CAB reports of a client struggling to meet the costs of multiple monthly prescriptions. She was not eligible for free prescriptions and did not have enough disposable income to enable her to afford a prescription pre-payment certificate.