

**COMHWA Member Briefing Paper – May
2023**



The Federal Government's policy proposal for 60-day Prescriptions and Cheaper Medicines

Purpose

To provide doctors the ability to offer people with prescriptions to some common medications a 60-day supply for the same price as the present 30-day scripts, that will halve the overall cost of getting their medication over time and require less visits to their doctors to have prescriptions written.

Background

In 2018 the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee (PBAC) proposed that the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) be amended to allow for a select range of medicines to be prescribed in 60-day increments, requiring a new prescription every 12 months. Presently, prescribed scripts are for a 30-day supply of medicine and must be re-prescribed every 6 months. The original 2018 proposal by the PBAC recommended that 60-day scripts should be offered 143 medicines on the PBS¹, but this recommendation was extended and revised in 2022 to increase this number to 320 medicines². The 2022 expanded list does include medicines relevant to some consumers of mental health receiving care for depression and anxiety, such as Sertraline (Zoloft), Citalopram (Celexa) and Escitalopram (Lexapro).

In the 2023 Australian federal budget, the Minister for Health and Aged Care Mark Butler announced that, in line with the PBAC's recommendations, the Federal Government would be amending the PBS to allow for 325 medicines to be prescribed in 60-day increments.³ The reasons provided by the Minister for this decision are as follows:

- To ensure that the six million people using the stipulated medicines pay half as much for their prescriptions.
- To allow people using these medicines to have to visit their doctors less frequently to get prescriptions, offering particular help to rural Australians and those who face difficulty travelling to their doctor.

The decision to prescribe an eligible medicine as a 60-day script will be at the discretion of doctors and will not be automatic.

¹Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. 2018. 'Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) August 2018 Meeting - New and Amended Listings for Increased Dispensing Quantities'
<https://www.pbs.gov.au/industry/listing/elements/pbac-meetings/pbac-outcomes/2018-08/Increased-Dispensing-Quantity-List-of-Medicines-8-April-2019.pdf>

²Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. 2022. 'Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee (PBAC) December 2022 Meeting - New and Amended Listings for Increased Dispensing Quantities'
<https://www.pbs.gov.au/industry/listing/elements/pbac-meetings/pbac-outcomes/2022-12/Increased-Dispensing-Quantities-List-of-Medicines.pdf>

³Office for the Minister for Health and Aged Care. 2023. 'Cheaper medicines to ease cost of living'
<https://www.health.gov.au/ministers/the-hon-mark-butler-mp/media/cheaper-medicines-to-ease-cost-of-living>

Consumers of Mental Health WA (CoMHWA)

The Issue

While providing two months medication for the same cost as one month to some consumers is a welcome step in the right direction, there are many consumers who may miss out on these cost savings and there is more that could be done to help consumers struggling with the cost of living to access more affordable medicine. In particular, doctors who are treating consumers experiencing intense distress may avoid providing a larger supply of medication, fearing potential overdose⁴. Consumers in these extremely vulnerable conditions should not be penalised by effectively having to pay twice as much for the same medications.

CoMHWA's Position and Response

- CoMHWA welcomes the option for doctors to offer consumers double the supply of medications for the same price, as well as helping those consumers who would have to make difficult travel solely for the purpose of obtaining a renewed prescription.
- CoMHWA believes that all consumers should benefit from the halving of costs in light of cost-of-living pressures, and advocates for the reduction in costs for all medication even if it is not offered in 60-day blocks. Consumers with doctors who are not comfortable with providing 60 days of supply for eligible medication should not be penalised for their distressed state.
- CoMHWA strongly objects to the Pharmacy Guild of Australia's position against 60-day scripts espoused in their recent statements, which represent a prioritisation of profit over consumer wellbeing and medicine-supply scaremongering.
- CoMHWA encourages the Federal Government to view this move towards cheaper medicines for consumers as a first step and pursue further reductions in cost that can be equitably applied.

Have your say:

CoMHWA is dedicated to representing your views on this reform. To have your say, please get in touch with our Systemic Advocacy Team at sysadvocacy@comhwa.org.au.

⁴Gould, Courtney and McLeod, Catie. 2023. 'Pharmacy Guild collides with Labor over changes to dispensing rules' <https://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/health/wellbeing/big-shake-up-to-how-medicines-are-dispensed-could-save-aussies-hundreds/news-story/93e7a89ec2107c40aea62bd26a267cb1>

