

7 Use of pharmaceuticals

Demand for the dispensing services of community and hospital pharmacists is derived from the volume of drugs prescribed by medical practitioners. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's publication *Australia's Health 1998* includes analyses of the role of prescribed and non-prescribed medications in the Australian health system. The detailed analyses are not repeated here, but they show the following main findings:

- An estimated \$4.0 billion of the total health system costs for diseases and injury of \$31.4 billion in 1993–94 can be attributed to the cost of pharmaceuticals. Respiratory illnesses had the highest disease cost attributed to the use of pharmaceuticals—\$784 million of a total cost of \$2,510 million (*Australia's Health 1998*, pp. 192–6).
- General practitioners in the 1995 Morbidity and Treatment Survey reported managing an average 151.2 problems per 100 encounters and prescribing drugs at an overall rate of 103.4 per 100 encounters, with treatments other than a drug prescription provided at a rate of 57.7 per 100 encounters. The most frequently prescribed drug was amoxicillin (an antibiotic, 5.1 per 100 encounters), followed by paracetamol (an analgesic, 4.7 per 100), and amoxicillin with clavulanic acid (an antibiotic, 3.0 per 100) (*Australia's Health 1998*, pp. 211–14).
- Based on the results of the 1995 National Health Survey, an estimated 12.4 million Australians (68.8% of the population) used some form of medication (including vitamins, minerals and herbal or natural medicines) in the two weeks before interview. The estimated 10.7 million people who used medications other than vitamins or minerals comprised approximately 62% who did so on medical advice and 51% who required a prescription to obtain the medication (*Australia's Health 1998*, pp. 222–4).
- Approximately 75% of prescriptions dispensed through community pharmacies qualify for benefits under the Commonwealth Government's Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS). The remainder are those priced under the general patient co-payment threshold and those not listed on the PBS schedule (that is, private prescriptions). The total cost of pharmaceuticals under the PBS was \$3.1 billion in 1996–97, up from \$1.5 billion in 1991–92 (*Australia's Health 1998*, pp. 223–6).
- The top three drugs dispensed in community pharmacies in 1996 were amoxicillin, paracetamol and salbutamol (*Australia's Health 1998*, p. 226).

Table 33: Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme: significant drug groups, Australia, 1995–96

Drug group	Prescription volume	Group cost (\$)	% of total cost	% increase over 1994–95
Antacids, drugs for treatment of peptic ulcers	7,356,937	308,089,641	11.5	24.0
Anti-asthmatics	9,514,228	239,387,122	9.0	15.1
Serum lipid reducing agents	4,040,388	194,887,133	7.3	30.4
Other groups	11,984,119	182,010,010	6.8	19.4
Calcium channel blockers	7,179,788	177,664,589	6.7	11.2
Anti-bacterials for systemic use	13,451,656	175,352,139	6.6	-5.3
Psychoanaleptics	5,316,648	167,520,633	6.3	50.2
Sex hormones and modulators	5,296,422	104,202,768	3.9	6.6
Analgesics	9,102,266	87,304,315	3.3	12.8
Drugs used in diabetes	2,271,266	78,874,722	3.0	13.3
Cardiac therapy	3,376,501	67,524,527	2.5	6.0
Psycholeptics	8,188,460	64,094,377	2.4	15.9
Anti-inflammatory and anti-rheumatics	4,679,312	60,122,105	2.3	3.6
Ophthalmologicals	4,742,190	55,082,549	2.1	6.2
Endocrine therapy	305,247	50,033,702	1.9	15.7
Anti-epileptics	1,227,194	49,068,201	1.8	19.8
Beta blocking agents	3,523,607	40,337,389	1.5	-1.4
Anti-virals for systemic use	157,000	33,598,641	1.3	11.2
Diuretics	2,882,648	33,100,929	1.2	1.8
Vaccines	1,863,056	32,885,840	1.2	-11.6
Anti-diarrhoeals, intestinal anti-inflammatory	953,247	23,668,194	0.9	17.9
Nasal preparations	1,250,370	22,507,662	0.8	71.5
Anti-acne preparations	121,406	22,461,415	0.8	15.1
Corticosteroids, dermatological	2,642,978	22,295,108	0.8	11.6
Anti-Parkinson drugs	550,777	22,062,413	0.8	1.0
Anti-spasmodic and anti-cholinergics	1,215,474	20,900,097	0.8	28.9
Diagnostic agents	396,003	17,344,151	0.6	9.8
Anti-fungals for dermatological use	917,779	16,037,342	0.6	4.4
Vitamins	325,397	13,576,349	0.5	27.7
Mineral supplements	1,101,556	12,258,098	0.5	0.8
Total	124,204,860	2,669,346,065	100.0	14.2

Note: Includes patients' contributions and 'Doctor's Bag' but excludes expenditure on miscellaneous items.

Source: Department of Health and Family Services.