



Collaboration is key to Medication Safety

Collaboration of medication safety pharmacists and procurement teams during times of shortages



Claire FitzGerald^{1,2} BPharm, Grad Dip Clin Pharm, FAdPha, FANZCAP
(Lead&Mgmt, Med Safety)

1. Medication Safety Leadership Committee
2. Head of Quality and Medication Safety, Icon Group Pharmacies

Medicine procurement is complex, involving government bodies, healthcare providers, pharmaceutical companies, and regulators, to ensure medicines are safe, effective, and accessible. During shortages, collaboration between the procurement team and the Medication Safety pharmacist is especially crucial in safeguarding medicine quality.

Medicine procurement in times of shortage

In Australia, procurement is guided by stringent regulations from health authorities, such as the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA), to ensure medicines meet safety, quality, and efficacy standards. Global supply chain vulnerabilities pose challenges, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to critical medication shortages and forcing the exploration of alternative sources of supply. Four years on, a significant number of medicine shortages continue to present problems for pharmacists in medication safety roles.

In the public sector, centralised procurement teams operate under strict regulatory guidelines, benefiting from economies of scale to provide a more consistent medicine supply. However, the private sector faces more pronounced challenges, which can result in variability in medicines availability.

Collaboration of medication safety pharmacists with procurement

During times of medicine shortages, the collaboration of the Medication Safety pharmacist with the procurement team becomes even more critical, especially when shortages can lead to finding substitute products.

Medication Safety pharmacists evaluate the efficacy and safety of substitute products, but also must consider alternative TGA registered products which will provide similar therapeutic outcomes. Overseas registered substitute products create risks, such as non-English labelling, different excipients and formulations, as well as assessment of Special Access Scheme (SAS) requirements. Products imported via the SAS can be much more expensive than the TGA registered product. As they are not subsidised by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), costs can be prohibitive for both patients and healthcare facilities.

Collaboration means communication

A key requirement to ensure safety is to understand the impact of each shortage for clinical teams and for national organisations this can vary between regions and facilities. Providing timely communication to pharmacists and healthcare providers ensures that appropriate measures can be taken locally to manage the shortage and minimises the impact on staff and patient care.

The Icon Group Procurement team and Quality and Medication Safety Unit (QMSU) recently developed a live Product Availability Report (PAR) to track and communicate medicine shortages across the national network of pharmacies servicing private health facilities. The medication safety pharmacists in the QMSU work closely with procurement to review all substitutes before they can be listed on the PAR. Where possible, clinical alternatives are provided and may be given preference over overseas products. The PAR lists out-of-stock medicines, approved substitutes, and links to information on clinical alternatives. The PAR illustrates how collaboration has resulted in improved inventory management across the organisation and to effectively handle medication shortage challenges.

Collaboration to ensure availability

As medicine shortages continue to pose challenges, the expertise of medication safety pharmacists in collaboration with procurement teams is essential to ensure medicines are available to support high-quality patient care. Working with procurement to manage medicine shortages has improved collaboration across all aspects of inventory management in our organisation.

How is the working relationship between your Medication Safety Pharmacist and Procurement team in your organisation? Do you have effective processes in place to manage shortages?