

ScriptSwitch: more than switching from brand to cheaper generic

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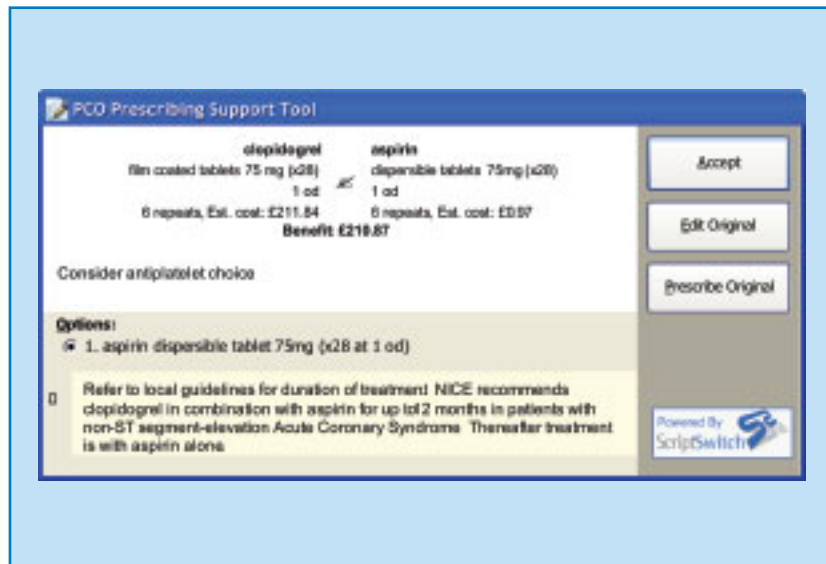


Figure 1. A prescription for clopidogrel prompts a cost comparison with dispersible aspirin and prescribing advice, showing the considerable savings that can be achieved where the switch is appropriate

ScriptSwitch, the prescribing support software that promotes product switching at the point of prescribing, is currently saving the NHS about £10 million per year according to the company's estimates.

Surprisingly, much of the savings come from switching between cheaper generic products in addition to the more obvious targets offered by expensive brands.

What is ScriptSwitch?

ScriptSwitch is software that, when installed on a practice computer, provides real-time information at the point of prescribing. It is currently used by 1650 practices (of 10 465 in the UK) in 74 PCTs (of 174 in England and Wales), and 19 of the 22 health boards in Wales have recently implemented the sys-

tem. ScriptSwitch says its system costs 37p per patient per year and can save £40 000 annually in the average practice.

In summary, the system displays a message to the prescriber when a recognised drug name is keyed into the computer. The drugs to be targeted, suggested alternatives for prescribing and the action to be taken are determined by the PCT, local health board or practice. Prescribe atorvastatin, for example, and the system could prompt you to consider simvastatin instead, display a message about rational prescribing or provide comparative cost data.

The process is equally easy for switches from high- to low-cost drugs within a class, from brands to generics or from generics back to brands that have become cheaper,

ScriptSwitch is a computer program that operates at the point of prescribing to promote cost-saving drug switching and rational prescribing. Steve Chaplin discusses how significant savings can be made from switching between drugs beyond brand-to-generic switches.

and between different formulations of generics (see Table 1).

Switching between formulations of generics

ScriptSwitch's analysis of its users' data from July to September 2007 shows that substantial savings are being made across all categories, but the biggest savings in the top 20 come from switching between formulations of generic drugs.

Although the target formulation may be infrequently prescribed compared with the suggested alternative, the cost difference can be large. In 2006, GPs in England wrote 660 000 prescriptions for paracetamol 500mg capsules at a cost of £8.40 each;¹ this compares with a net ingredient cost (NIC) for paracetamol tablets of £2.41. The *Drug Tariff*

Rank*	Original product	Price	Replacement product	Price	% savings
<i>Switching between formulations</i>					
1	paracetamol caps 500mg	65p (32)	paracetamol tabs 500mg	52p (32)	20
10	omeprazole gastro-res caps 40mg	£2.19 (7)	omeprazole gastro-res caps 20mg	£2.02 (28)	54
13	fluoxetine caps 60mg	£52.14 (30)	fluoxetine caps 20mg	68p (30)	96
14	phenytoin sodium tabs 100mg	£40.00 (28)	phenytoin sodium caps 100mg	£2.83 (84)	98
17	naproxen e/c tabs 500mg	£8.71 (56)	naproxen tabs 500mg	£2.62 (100)	83
18	erythromycin caps e/c granules 250mg	£6.61 (30)	erythromycin e/c tabs 250mg	£3.32 (28)	46
<i>From high-cost to lower-cost drug</i>					
2	clopidogrel f/c tabs 75mg	£37.83 (30)	aspirin dispersible tabs 75mg	28p (28)	99
4	atorvastatin tabs 10mg	£18.03 (28)	simvastatin tabs 40mg	£1.39 (28)	92
5	atorvastatin tabs 20mg	£24.64 (28)	simvastatin tabs 40mg	£1.39 (28)	94
6	risedronate sodium tabs 35mg	£20.30 (4)	alendronic acid tabs 70mg	£4.12 (4)	80
9	ferrous sulphate tabs 200mg	£2.06 (28)	ferrous fumarate tabs 210mg	£1.44 (100)	80
<i>From brand to generic</i>					
7	Lamisil tabs 250mg	£51.36 (28)	terbinafine tabs 250mg	£3.81 (28)	93
8	Fosamax Once Weekly tabs	£22.80 (4)	alendronic acid tabs 70mg	£4.12 (4)	82
<i>From generic to brand</i>					
3	hydrocortisone cream 1%	£5.54 (30g)	Efcortelan cream 1%	75p (30g)	86
11	salbutamol CFC-free inhaler 100µg/dose (200 doses)	£2.88	Ventolin Evohaler 100µg/dose (200 doses)	£1.50	48
12	hydrocortisone ointment 1%	£5.96 (30g)	Efcortelan ointment 1%	75p (30g)	89
20	sulfasalazine e/c tabs 500mg	£30.75 (112)	Salazopyrin EN tabs 500mg	£8.43 (112)	73
*ranking of total savings made among ScriptSwitch users					

Table 1. Examples of savings made from switching between products (NHS costs, January 2008 *MIMS/Drug Tariff*)

price of generic fluoxetine 60mg capsules is 25 times more than the equivalent dose of 20mg capsules (58 400 prescriptions were dispensed for the 60mg capsules in 2006).

High-cost to low-cost drug
NICE recommends low-dose aspirin as the antiplatelet of choice for secondary prevention of myocardial infarction (MI). Clopidogrel may be prescribed for patients with aspirin sensitivity or in combination with aspirin for four weeks in patients with ST segment elevation MI or for 12 months in patients with non-ST segment acute coronary syndrome

who are at moderate to high risk of another MI or death.² GPs therefore must remember to discontinue clopidogrel and substitute low-dose aspirin at the appropriate time.

Switching from clopidogrel to low-dose aspirin provides the second biggest saving for a single drug recorded by ScriptSwitch. With a price of £35.31 per month and 3.4 million prescriptions dispensed in 2006, clopidogrel 75mg is a ripe target for substituting with dispersible aspirin 75mg at a cost of only 28p a month (see Figure 1).

The Coronary Heart Disease NSF has increased statin prescrib-

ing by about 30 per cent annually.³ NICE recommends using the cheapest statin,⁴ and given the difference in cost between the most- and least-expensive statins, it is not surprising that switching is actively encouraged.⁵

Substituting simvastatin 40mg for atorvastatin 10mg or 20mg can save £16-£23 per month. With nearly 10 million scrips for these doses of atorvastatin dispensed last year at a total cost of £177 million, the potential savings cannot be ignored.

The appearance in the top 20 of ferrous fumarate as an alternative to ferrous sulphate (see Figure 2) will be unexpected for many

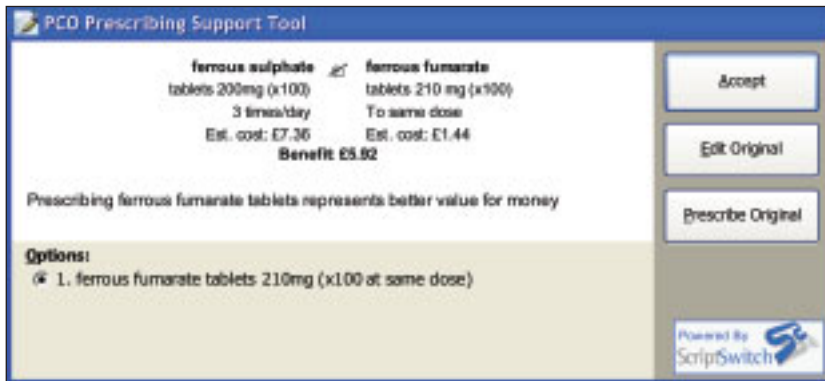


Figure 2. Ferrous fumarate is offered as a much cheaper alternative to ferrous sulphate

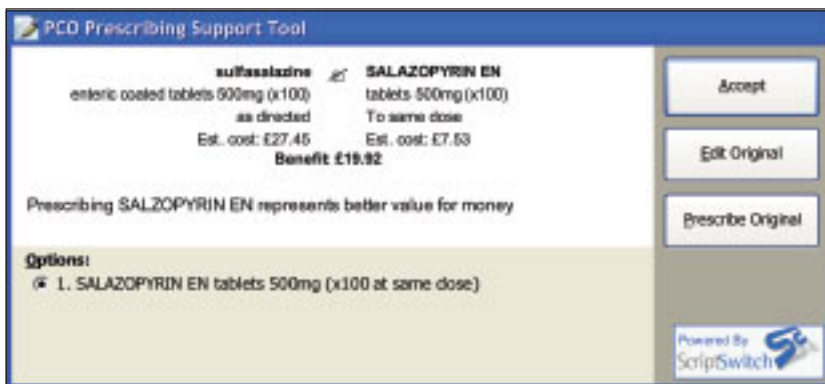


Figure 3. Substantial savings will be made by prescribing Salazopyrin EN tablets instead of the generic formulation

GPs, but the *Drug Tariff* reveals the price gap between them. The price for ferrous sulphate 200mg is £2.06 for 28 tablets compared with £1.44 for 100 tablets of ferrous fumarate 210mg (equivalent to 40p for 28). Over 3.8 million scrips for ferrous sulphate were dispensed in 2006 at a cost of £17.7 million, when the same therapeutic gain could have been achieved at one-fifth of this cost.

From brand to generic

With the generic prescribing rate now around 82 per cent,⁶ there is less to be gained by campaigning for generic alternatives to expensive brands than was the case even 10 years ago, but some important exceptions with very large price differentials remain.

Only 7 per cent of prescribing for terbinafine tablets in 2006 was by brand, amounting to 34 000 pre-

scriptions,¹ but even this residual volume offers substantial potential for savings. The basic price of a calendar pack of Lamisil 250mg is £44.66 – 13 times greater than the *Drug Tariff* price for the generic equivalent.

Similarly, Fosamax Once Weekly costs £22.80 for four tablets compared with a *Tariff* price of £4.12. The branded product accounted for 12 per cent of all scrips for alendronic acid 70mg in 2006, but cost over £12 million.¹

From generic to brand

The vagaries of drug pricing mean that the constant emphasis on generic prescribing occasionally backfires and attention to detail in the *Drug Tariff* will always be rewarded.

Three brands appearing in the top 20 switches are cheaper than the generic alternatives: the Ventolin Evohaler 100µg costs £1.50 compared with a *Tariff* price of £2.88, Efcortelan ointment 1 per cent 30g costs 75p compared with £5.96 for the generic alternative (there are similar savings with Efcortelan cream), and Salazopyrin EN 500mg costs £8.43 for 112 tablets compared with £30.75 for the equivalent generic (see Figure 3).

Inhaled CFC-free salbutamol is heavily prescribed. In 2006, there were nearly 12 million

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prescriptions for the generic inhaler and 1.2 million for the Ventolin Evohaler, representing potential savings of over £15 million per year from switching to the brand.

The future

There is strong pressure on PCTs to maximise their savings on prescribing in primary care. ScriptSwitch estimates a further £390 million could be saved by product switching if its system was applied throughout the UK. It has now added dressings and appliances to its database, noting the savings potential from 22 million items dispensed annually at a cost £480 million.

There is no certainty about how stable price differentials will be – *Drug Tariff* prices change to reflect current prices and manu-

facturers may reduce their prices in response to market trends. For practices, the necessary changes can be made automatically and with little inconvenience, but the continuing success of this strategy depends on patients coping with differences in the appearance of their medicines.

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By Steve Chaplin, a pharmacist who specialises in writing on therapeutics