Wales leads the way as prescription charges fall

Patients in Wales were celebrating today as prescription charges fell by £1 to £5. First Minister Rhodri Morgan and Health Minister Jane Hutt said that this was the first step towards free prescriptions for everyone in Wales.

During a visit to Boots in Cardiff the First Minister and Jane Hutt met with patients who will be benefiting from the reduction in charges and heard what a difference it would make to them.

Mr Morgan said: "We have committed ourselves to introducing free prescriptions in Wales by 2007 and I am glad that today we are seeing the first step towards that. I want health to be accessible to all patients in Wales and by making prescriptions free for everyone we are starting to make that happen.

"Evidence suggests that prescription charges do deter people from asking for National Health Service prescriptions and from having their prescription dispensed, either in part or in its entirety. Surveys done by the Citizens Advice Bureaux and the Office of Fair Trading have confirmed this. If patients cannot afford the medicines they need to treat their condition, the long-term costs to the NHS could be far greater in terms of avoidable hospital treatment."

Jane Hutt said: "Free prescriptions for all is the simplest and most effective way of resolving inequalities and inconsistencies in prescribing which have existed since the rules were established in 1968. To introduce exemptions to certain groups would be complex to introduce and implement. Our proposals are straightforward and effective. This way everyone benefits, chronically ill, the low paid, everyone.

"There will be subsequent phased reductions as we work towards free prescription in 2007. Those people who will benefit from free prescriptions are those whose medicines are prescribed by a prescriber contracted to a Welsh LHB, on a Welsh prescription form and dispensed by a Welsh pharmacist.

"This is a policy unique to Wales which reaffirms our commitment to provide the best possible access to healthcare for everyone in the country and to reduce inequalities."

Notes:

First Minister Rhodri Morgan and Health Minister Jane Hutt will be at Boots, St. David's Centre, Queen Street, Cardiff at 11am on Friday 1st October to mark the reduction in prescription charges. Other Ministers will also be making regional visits to pharmacies across Wales. Please contact Kate Williams on 029 2089 8100 for further information.

- The price of prescriptions has been frozen at £6 in Wales since 2001. From October 1st 2004 the cost will go down to £5 per item.
- The cost of a pre-payment certificate is currently £31.40 for 4 months, and £86.20 for a year. From October 1st 2004 the cost will go down to £71.83 for a year and £26.17 for 4 months.
- Those people who will benefit from free prescriptions are those whose medicines are prescribed by a prescriber contracted to a Welsh LHB, on a Welsh prescription form and dispensed by a Welsh pharmacist.
- Prescriptions will be free in Wales by 2007.
- Further reductions will be made in 2005 and 2006 - an announcement will be made at a later stage on the amounts involved and timing.
- In England prescriptions currently cost £6.40.

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