



Patients' perceptions of generic drugs in Greece



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ABSTRACT

The use of generic drugs is growing increasingly around the world and in Greece, in particular, in order to reduce pharmaceutical expenditure. However, patients' perceptions and attitudes about generics have only partially been studied so far in Greece.

Objective: This study aimed to examine the factors that influence the attitude of patients and consumers regarding generic drugs.

Methods: A questionnaire survey of 364 patients visiting a pharmacy was conducted. The questionnaire consisted of 29 questions, including questions regarding their knowledge about generics, the reasons for using them, their previous experience, their willingness for generic substitution, and the factors behind these choices.

Results: Nearly half of the participants in the survey know the term 'generic' and that it has a lower price compared to the brand name drug. Their views on safety and efficacy vary significantly and the main source of information on generics is the media and the internet. The lack of knowledge is the main barrier for attitudes of doctors. Health professionals play the most influential role for the substitution of a branded drug by a generic, followed by the cost of the generic.

Conclusions: Almost half of the patients know about generic drugs, with their lower price being the most popular feature which most patients are familiar with. It seems that primarily the doctor and, subsequently the pharmacist play the most important role in a patient's decision to replace his/her medicine with a generic.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the use of generic drugs is steadily increasing worldwide as a result of the economic pressure exerted to reduce pharmaceutical expenditure budget [1,2]. Nevertheless, the idea of prescribing and dispensing generics is controversial and questions still remain about the possible dissemination practices for generics [3].

All medicines, both original and generic, regardless of the country of production (USA, India, etc.) to be imported and placed in the Greek market, must be tested and approved by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and the National Organization for Medicines (EOF). EOF systematically carries out laboratory tests and inspections. Moreover, since the licensing and marketing of drugs, EOF makes laboratory checks and scheduled and unscheduled inspections. Generic drugs are marketed either by their internationally approved non-specialized scientific name (International Non-proprietary Name – INN) or by brand name; therefore, they are called branded generics (generic with brand name).

The authorization of generics is in accordance with the laws in force in the European Union and is held by

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a national authority or the European Medicines Agency and provides thorough evaluation of scientific data. This includes bioequivalence study or exemption from submission bioequivalence study, where applicable [4].

So far, little research has been carried out in Greece to investigate the perceptions of patients regarding generic drugs. In Greece 3000 generics are marketed at the level of packaging (2011 data) on a total of some 7300 drugs [5]. Indeed, while Greece is a producer of generic drugs, and about half of the Greek pharmaceutical companies are involved in the production and distribution of generics [6], generic drugs consumption amounts currently (2015) to only 20% of the total sales, while the branded pharmaceutical products of multinational companies to over 80% [7]. The share of generics in the Greek market is comparatively lower than in other countries of the European Union [7]. The Greek Government aimed to increase the share of generics, according to the objectives of the Memorandum, gradually to 60%, which is the European average, by the end of 2013.

To this end, the Ministry of Health implemented the Act of Prescriptions based on the active substance in 2012. This measure initially concerned ten active substances and then it was extended to all substances. Physicians are allowed an exemption from this rule by prescribing brand named drugs up to 15% of the total of their prescriptions. For each active substance a reference value is indicated corresponding to the cheapest generic for which the insured will pay only their co-payment. Pharmacists are required to hold in stock and dispense the medicinal product with the lowest retail price for each active substance. While dispensing the prescriptions, pharmacists are obliged to inform the patient, separately for each such active substance, what is the medicinal product with the lowest price and what is the co-payment corresponding to this drug. Otherwise, pharmacists can be penalized. If the doctor or the insured patient chooses, instead of the cheapest, a more expensive generic drug of the same active substance, the latter should pay to the pharmacy, in addition to the co-payment, the difference in price as well [8]. These measures were updated in 2015 when the Ministry informed physicians that they can once again, suggest the trade name of the drug (brand name drug or branded generic), they would rather the patient had, next to the active ingredient on the prescription. According to an interview the Minister of Health gave, this measure is an “incentive” to increase the use of generics, which in Greece remains very low to this day, reaching no more than 20% when in other European countries it reaches 70% and even 80%. “It is an indirect help to generics,” said the Minister, arguing that this change exists as a possibility ensuing the original Act of 2012 to prescribe the active substance [9]. And, although he thinks that this intervention cannot aim at specific percentage goals with regards to generics, it can lower the co-payment of patients from 25% to 15% when they choose the generic drug.

The Greek pharmaceutical market is projected to decline by a small annual rate of -3.2% ($\pm 1.5\%$) during the period 2010–2015, reaching at 3.8 billion € in wholesale market prices in 2015 [10]. The factors influencing this downward trend are primarily, the consecutive reductions in the Price Bulletin of drugs, where the price of the branded

drugs is reduced due to the expiry of their patent, and secondly the reduction of the price of generic drugs, and the decline of the wholesale price margin [11].

There is no doubt that brand name drugs have exerted a tremendous influence on drug use, but the generics being bioequivalent to the brand named are deemed equally safe, while they have a better cost–effectiveness relation. Generic medicines can cure many diseases today and their use provides the opportunity to significantly reduce the costs of the health budget [12], as well as obtain savings that may be used to buy new and more effective drugs [13].

Patients, on the other hand, seem to be divided as to the safety and efficacy of generic drugs [14]. Other studies have also shown patients' attitudes to be affected by their concerns about safety and efficiency of drugs since a long time ago [15]. Through the years, however, the knowledge of patients and consumers about generic drugs has steadily increased. But, even though the positive attitude toward generic drugs seems to have followed a good course over the years, this does not necessarily result in increased use of generics. Although the generic substitution policy is more acceptable than before in many countries, many patients are still of the impression that generics are cheaper than the branded drugs because of their lower quality and effectiveness [16]. The substitution of generic drugs, for a large number of patients, is not considered an equal alternative to the branded drug, and these patients are likely to need some kind of training and support. Besides, the information on generic drugs has been found to significantly influence the patient's decision to replace or not his/her medication [17].

It has been observed that where it has been attempted to communicate generics with briefings and promotional campaigns through the media, most patients know about generic drugs [18]. The main reason for the use and acceptance of generic drugs appears to be the lower cost. Another important factor is the trust patients have on health professionals, while previous experience in generic drugs also affects patients' views. Safety and efficacy seem, also, to be important factors [18]. Moreover, important reasons for accepting the substitution seem to be the saving in pharmaceutical expenditure and the advice offered by pharmacists [19].

Regarding the education of patients, it is stated that they need information and advice from health professionals and government agencies in order to increase future consumption of generic medicines [18]. Patients, therefore, rely on the advice of health professionals when making decisions about their medicines [18].

On the other hand, the preference of patients and consumers for a particular brand name drug seems to be the key factor that affects their perception of generics and the substitution. Pharmacists have stated that the media create and foment fear among consumers and that consumers are likely to associate an unexplained health problem with generics [20].

From the above emerges that, although for the Greek government the increased use of generics is one of the main tools for reducing pharmaceutical expenditure, there is no published research on the patients' perceptions regarding generics. Furthermore, since the relevant studies published

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