Business Services Organisation

General Practice Prescribing Data
Frequently Asked Questions

December 2013

About General Practice Prescribing Data

Why is the data being published?
The UK government has made a commitment to transparency in the public sector. DHSSPS have requested information is published on a regular basis about the prescribing performance of GP practices in the interests of good governance and public accountability.

Where does the data come from?
The Business Services Organisation (BSO) is the provider of the data. GP practice level prescribing data is obtained from the BSO's prescribing and dispensing information systems.

What does the data cover?
The data covers prescriptions that are prescribed in Northern Ireland by GPs or Nurses (within a GP Practice), that are subsequently dispensed by a community pharmacist, dispensing doctor or appliance supplier and are finally submitted to the Business Services Organisation (BSO) for payment and have been paid. The data will include items that have been ordered on a stock form, but excludes hospice items.

Only prescriptions that are subsequently dispensed are included in the dataset – for example, if a patient does not take a prescription to the pharmacy for dispensing, then no information about that prescription is included in the dataset.

For each GP practice in Northern Ireland, and for each medicine (by presentation), dressing and appliance, the following information is provided:
- The number of prescribed items that are dispensed
- The quantity of tablets, capsules, liquid etcetera dispensed
- The gross cost, and
- The actual cost

GP practices are identified only by their assigned practice number, so an additional data file (linked to the first by the practice number) provides the name and address of each practice. Each presentation is identified by the BNF Code (see below).

Does the data include prescriptions written by prescribers other than GPs, such as nurses?
Yes, prescribing by any prescriber attached to a practice is included. The data includes non-medical prescribers who are attached to GP practices: nurses, pharmacists, optometrists, chiropodists and (potentially) radiographers.

Are all practices included?
All practices in Northern Ireland are included in this data where (in the relevant month) a prescription has been dispensed and submitted to the BSO by the dispensing contractor as a claim for payment.
The practices included are all registered practices in Northern Ireland.
Prescriptions issued from a branch surgery are included in the totals for the main practice site.

Are there the same number of practices in the dataset each month?
The number of GP practices may vary from month to month because:
- Practices may close and new practices may open from month to month.
- Practices may merge to form one larger practice or split to form a number of smaller practices

Is information available for individual prescribers?
No, practice prescribing data is being provided at the level of the GP practice, and includes prescribing for all GPs and other prescribers attached to that practice.

How does NI GP prescribing data differ from the GP prescribing data published for England and Wales?
The NHS Information Centre (NHSIC) has been providing English GP prescribing data since December 2011, and NHS Wales have been providing similar data for Wales since April 2013. The NHSIC currently publishes GP prescribing data at presentation level (previously also available at chemical level) on a monthly basis, and NHS Wales also publishes monthly data.
The data covers the same variables as the data published in the NI dataset, but there are a couple of differences between the NI data and that of England and Wales. For example, container fees are used in the English calculation of actual cost. These are not involved in the NI calculation. However, container fees only amount to less than £300 per month in NI.
Also, names of products may not be directly comparable between the English and NI datasets as the English names are based on their Business Services Authority Drug and Appliance database, and the NI names are based on the UK wide standardised Dictionary of Medicines and Devices (DM+D).

What information is available?
At any given time, data covering prescriptions dispensed up to the end of the previous quarter (from April 2013 onwards) will be available, split by individual month.
Each dataset will be available on or before the last working day of each quarter and will cover dispensing information from the previous quarter.

Is practice prescribing data available by quarter or for a whole year?
Practice prescribing data is only available by month.

Will GP Practice prescribing data be published to cover Prescriptions dispensed before April 2013?

There are no plans to publish GP prescribing by Practice for products dispensed prior to April 2013.

Accessing the Data

Where is the data? / How do I access the data?
Practice level prescribing data can be accessed from here:
http://www.hscbusiness.hscni.net/services/2471.htm
The files may be downloaded by right-clicking the appropriate links on the web page and using the *Save Target As* option to download the files to a local computer.
Practice prescribing data is available in both *comma-separated values* (csv) and Excel (xlsx) format.
For every quarter, data for individual month will be provided separately and data for each month will consist of approximately 450,000 rows of data. Users should check that their software will be able to accept large files before downloading.
The supplementary file(s) of practice details are much smaller and are available in xls format.

Can I extract the data for just one practice/month?
Data for each month will be provided separately in xlsx and csv formats. It is not possible to download data for only one practice or for any subset of practices.

How do I find my practice?
Each practice in the practice prescribing data file is identified by its assigned practice code. Practice details, including names and addresses, that relate to the practice codes are available in supplementary files(s) from which practices can be identified.

Why are practice names not included in the main data file?
It is important to identify practices in terms of their unique practice codes. This allows the data to be linked to other datasets that use the same practice codes, and avoids potential confusion over practices that have similar names. Names and addresses of practices are held in a separate file to reduce the size of the prescription data file. Each practice has many rows in the prescription data file, and the use of practice codes means that it is not necessary to duplicate practice name and address information throughout the prescribing data file.

Where are the figures for GP practices in England, Scotland and Wales?
The practice level prescribing data currently being released from data held by the BSO, covers only practices in Northern Ireland. Information on data available for England, Scotland and Wales can be found at the following websites:
http://www.hscic.gov.uk/gpprescribingdata
http://www.isdscotland.org/
http://www.wales.nhs.uk/sites3/page.cfm?orgid=428&pid=65866

Understanding the Data

What data items are in the Prescribing data (Presentation level) by GP Practice file?

The presentation level prescribing data for each month contains the following data items:

Practice code (3 characters)

Year

Month

VTM_NM (Substance / Product name)

VMP_NM (Generic Name)

AMP_NM (Branded / Generic Name)

Presentation

Strength

Total Items

Total Quantity

Total Gross Cost (£)

Total Actual cost (£)

British National Formulary (BNF) code (15 characters)

BNF Classifications (Chapter, Section, Paragraph & Sub-Paragraph)

Further details are given in an Explanatory Notes document which is available at
http://www.hscbusiness.hscni.net/services/2471.htm

What is an Item?

A prescription item is a single supply of a medicine, dressing or appliance written on a prescription form. If a prescription form includes three medicines it is counted as three prescription items.

Item figures do not provide any indication of the length of treatment or quantity of medicine prescribed. Patients with a long term condition usually get regular prescriptions. While many prescriptions are for one month (28 or 30 days supply), items will be for varying length of treatment and quantity.

What is the difference between Gross Cost and Actual cost?

The **Gross Cost** is the basic price of a drug, i.e. the price listed in the Drug Tariff or price lists.

Actual Cost is the estimated cost to the NHS. Actual Cost is calculated by subtracting the discount per item from the Gross Cost.

What is the British National Formulary (BNF)?

The BNF is a joint publication by the British Medical Association and the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, providing information on the selection, prescribing, dispensing and administration of medicines available in the UK. In the BNF, medicines are classified by therapeutic group, for example: cardiovascular, respiratory, gastro-intestinal, etc.

The BSO information system (the source of the practice level prescribing data) uses the therapeutic classifications defined in the BNF for chapters 1 – 15 and related sub-classifications.

BSO has created 'pseudo BNF chapters' for items not included in BNF chapters 1 to 15. These are as follows:

Chapter 18 – Preparations used in diagnosis
Chapter 19 – Other drugs and preparations
Chapter 20 – Dressings
Chapter 21 – Appliances
Chapter 22 – Incontinence appliances
Chapter 23 – Stoma appliances, and
Chapter 99 – Unclassified

What is Quantity?
The quantity of a drug dispensed is measured in units depending on the formulation of the product, which is given in the drug name. Quantities should not be added together across preparations because of different strengths and formulations.
Where the formulation is tablet, capsule, ampoule, vial etc. the quantity will be the number of tablets, capsules, ampoules, vials etc.
Where the formulation is a liquid, the quantity will be the number of millilitres
Where the formulation is a solid form (eg. Cream, gel, ointment), the quantity will be the number of grammes.

Why do some records have blank values under all Name columns?
There are some uncommon products that have not had a unique drug code or name assigned to them. There is no recognised UK wide equivalent product.

Why are there some records without a BNF code?

There are some less frequently prescribed products that have not had a unique drug code or name assigned to them by the BSO. Therefore approximately 10% of items do not have a BNF code attached, of which more than half are items in wound management, dressings and appliances. These items are within pseudo BNF chapters and have not yet been coded in a similar way to England.

Why do some practices have multiple records for a generic product but the same BNF Code?
There may be instances where certain generic products will appear more than once for any given practice with the same BNF Code attached. This is a result of the DM+D database model, which is used in producing the outputs, having separate records that identify specific manufacturers / suppliers. Any analysis of generic products should therefore be performed on VMP_NM or BNF Code, and not AMP_NM.
For more information on DM+D coding, please see the DM+D website:
http://www.dmd.nhs.uk/index.html

Using the Data

Can I link the practice code to any other practice information?
Potentially the information can be linked to other published data that uses the practice code.

Are details for a particular type of dressing or appliance included?
Information in the presentation level release lists individual types of dressings and appliances.

Are details for a particular brand of drug included?
Details for particular brands of drug are available.

Can I have the data for a class of drugs, for example I want to know about all the statins?
In this example, information on all statins can be obtained by grouping the individual statins medicines.
NHS Prescription Services has produced a booklet on BNF classifications and the pseudo classifications used, and this is available at:
http://www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/PrescriptionServices/Documents/PrescriptionServices/BNF__Classification_Booklet_2011.pdf

From this data, can I find out if a GP practice is a good prescriber? From this data, can I compare my GP practice with other local GP practices?
Practice prescribing data requires careful interpretation, and this information should not be looked at in isolation. This information should not be used to make judgements on the quality of prescribing, as a broad range of factors influence the clinical need for a medicine and decisions about which medicine is the most appropriate choice for an individual patient.
Comparisons between GP practices requires further information about prescribing; number, age and sex of patients on the list; and knowledge about the medicines and why they are prescribed.

I am prescribed a drug for a rare condition; can I be identified in this dataset?
All practice level information down to presentation level is being released, but no information about patients is contained in the data. It is not possible to identify individual patients in the data.
If you are the only patient receiving a certain drug in your practice then the number of items prescribed and their cost for that medicine will be in this dataset but it will not show which patient received it. Note that information about the price of drugs is already available in the public domain.

From this data, can I find out how many people with a particular condition, such as depression, have been given prescriptions?
Practice prescribing data is based on information about prescriptions written and dispensed, and does not include any information about the number of patients who have been given prescriptions.
Prescriptions given to patients tell the pharmacist what medicines to dispense for that patient, but do not contain any information on why the prescription was given to the patient, such as the clinical condition of the patient.

Can I work out a prescribing rate – what percentage of patients receive prescriptions?
The number of patients registered with each practice as of the start of each Quarter is available in the Practice reference file that accompanies each GP prescribing dataset. However it is important to note that practice level prescribing data does not reveal how many individual patients actually received a prescription; some registered patients may have received no prescriptions at all.

From this data, can I find out which pharmacies dispensed these prescriptions?
Information on dispensers, such as pharmacies, is not available from this dataset.

Can I find out about private prescriptions given to patients by GPs?
Private prescriptions are not included in this dataset.