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FEATURE ARTICLE

Consumer Concerns on Pharmacy Practices in Fiji

For thousands of Fijians, access to affordable medication is not just a matter of convenience, it's a matter of survival. With a healthcare system that strives to support citizens through public health initiatives and regulatory frameworks, pharmacies play a vital role in the daily health and wellbeing of the nation. But while most pharmacies uphold these responsibilities diligently, concerns raised to the Consumer Council of Fiji (CCF) highlight a number of persistent issues that continue to affect consumers across the country.

VAT-Free Prescription Medication: A Relief, When Honoured

One of the most welcome policies for consumers came through the 2023/2024 National Budget, which made all prescription medications zero-rated for Value Added Tax (VAT). This means that instead of paying the standard 15% VAT that typically applies to goods and services, consumers with a valid prescription pay no VAT at all on their medication.

In theory, this should ease the financial burden on low-income households, particularly those living below the poverty line. However, according to complaints received by the Consumer Council of Fiji, a handful of pharmacies are not always applying this rule as they should. While the vast majority of pharmacies comply with the VAT exemption, a few continue to charge the 15% VAT even when prescription medication is purchased.

In other cases, pharmacies may not have the exact medication prescribed by a doctor in stock. When this happens, consumers are offered alternative medication, but without always being informed whether these substitutes fall under the VAT exemption or not. The lack of transparency in these cases not only causes confusion but may result in patients unknowingly paying more than they should.

The Consumer Council stresses the importance of obtaining and checking receipts. The receipt is a consumer's best friend in these situations. It will clearly show whether VAT has been charged, and if there are discrepancies, consumers should report them immediately to the Council for further action.

Price-Controlled Medication

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Another key area of concern is price-controlled medication. Each quarter, the Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission (FCCC) publishes a list titled *Price Determination for Essential Pharmaceutical Products*. This list includes widely used medications such as antibiotics, aspirin, cough syrups, painkillers, laxatives, and diabetes treatments.

Strict conditions apply to these medications. Importers, wholesalers, and pharmacies are legally obligated to maintain sufficient stock and adhere to maximum retail prices. If a pharmacy runs out of a specific quantity—for example, 100ml of cough syrup—it must apply a proportional price to any alternative quantity. So, if the price for 100ml is \$2.00 and only a 110ml bottle is available, the price must be adjusted to \$2.20.

The order also caps mark-ups for wholesalers, mandated transparent pricing displays within pharmacy premises, and requires at least one product from each category of essential medication to be stocked at all times.

Despite these clear rules, the Consumer Council has received complaints suggesting that some pharmacies may not be fully complying. In some cases, consumers have been charged prices above the prescribed maximum retail prices, or found essential medicines to be routinely out of stock without explanation or substitute options provided.

Consumers must be made aware that they have the right to ask for and see the price list. It must be prominently displayed, and pharmacists are obliged to inform customers if a price-controlled item is available, so that informed choices can be made.

The Council encourages consumers to report any breaches, as non-compliance can have serious legal consequences for pharmacies found to be ignoring the price control order.

Unregulated Over-the-Counter Medication: Shop Smart

Not all medications in Fiji fall under prescription or price control. A wide range of over-the-counter (OTC) medication—vitamins, supplements, antacids, cold and flu tablets, and herbal remedies—are unregulated in terms of pricing. This gives pharmacies full discretion to set prices based on their own margins and operational costs.

While this freedom allows for competition, it also means that the same product can be priced quite differently from one pharmacy to the next. And with no pricing benchmarks, consumers may end up overpaying, sometimes significantly.

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In these cases, the Consumer Council's message is simple: shop smart. Take a few extra minutes to compare prices between pharmacies, especially for items you purchase regularly. It could save you a lot of money in the long run.

Some pharmacies may also offer discounts for bulk purchases, while others may provide cheaper generics. Asking questions and being proactive is key.

What Consumers Can Do

The Consumer Council of Fiji urges all consumers to be vigilant, informed, and assertive when it comes to their healthcare rights. Here are a few practical tips for dealing with pharmacies:

- **Always request and keep your receipt:** It will show whether VAT was charged and help track pricing.
- **Know your rights:** Price-controlled medications must be sold at regulated prices, and this information should be visible in every pharmacy.
- **Ask questions:** If offered an alternative medication, clarify if it falls under VAT exemption or price control.
- **Report issues:** If you believe a pharmacy is overcharging or breaching any rules, contact the Consumer Council with your complaint and receipt.
- **Do price comparisons:** Especially for OTC products, check a few different pharmacies before purchasing.

Final Thoughts

The Consumer Council is here to work to ensure better outcomes for pharmacy consumers. However, enforcement is only part of the solution, an informed and proactive public is just as crucial. With a little awareness and assertiveness, consumers in Fiji can help ensure that pharmacies remain not only a place of healing, but a space where fairness, transparency, and ethics are the true prescription.

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