

Medicine shortages in Norwegian pharmacies – status in 2024

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Background

Shortages of medicines are an increasing challenge in primary healthcare. A national pharmacy practice standard for handling medicine shortages is implemented in all Norwegian pharmacies. A survey was conducted in March 2024 to document the current situation. Pharmacies manage to keep a high delivery rate, despite of the global situation.

Purpose

The purpose of this survey was to document the situation in Norwegian pharmacies in 2024 and compare the results with two previous studies from 2019 and 2022.

Method

Data were collected through an online survey in 49 pharmacies in a 4-week period in March 2024. The pharmacy employees reported when they did not have the medicine prescribed in stock, the time spent to manage the situation, if they needed help from a colleague or contact with the prescriber, if the wholesaler had the medicine, if they provided the patient an alternative directly or other outcomes. The data was analysed descriptively.

Results

The patient received the prescribed medicine immediately in 97% of all prescription fillings. The patient left the pharmacy empty-handed without an immediate solution in 0.5% – 0.9% of the prescription fillings. This amounts to up to 600 000 prescriptions yearly. These situations pose the potentially greatest clinical threat to the patients due to discontinuation or delay in medicine treatment and the consequences thereof. A few medicines accounted for a large proportion of reported shortages. Most medicines were not completely unavailable in the market, but there were too few packages to meet the national demand. The pharmacy employees used 3.3 minutes extra handling the prescription with shortage issues. The national pharmacy practice standard for handling medicine shortages contributes to the high delivery rate in pharmacies. The wholesalers' contributions securing alternatives to medicines effected by shortages from the international market is also important. The wholesalers have increased their resources spent on handling medicine shortages considerably in the last years.

Conclusion

The delivery rate is nearly identical in all three surveys. The national pharmacy practice standard and the huge effort made by the wholesalers to provide the pharmacies with alternatives in shortage situations, are important contributors to the high delivery rate.