

## Urgent: Back pocket scripts for COVID antivirals

Tēnā koutou katoa,

On Thursday 14 July, there was an announcement made by COVID-19 Minister Dr Ayesha Verrall during the COVID-19 media briefing that people would be able to ask their GP for a 'back pocket prescription' for antiviral medication. There is also information on the Unite Against COVID-19 webpage to this effect, as well as one-page adverts in national media and media releases sent out encouraging this.

Since yesterday, there have been multiple concerns raised around this announcement. We have had reports of patients ringing up practices requesting scripts for Paxlovid, and one surgery reported close to 100 calls yesterday.

We were as surprised as you at this announcement because at no point has there been a discussion with the College on the topic of issuing back pocket prescriptions. There are concerns about whether this is legal with the PHARMAC endorsement based around the patient having tested positive for COVID-19 or been a household contact.

We know with the antivirals, Paxlovid in particular, that there are issues around contraindications with moderate to severe hepatic disease and dose adjustments required for renal dysfunction.

In addition, there are multiple interactions possible with commonly prescribed medications including statins, anti-epileptics, and anti-coagulants that require medication adjustment and in some cases substitution. As with any prescribing, these decisions need to weigh up the risks and benefits in prescribing as well as the risk of hospitalisation for the patient.

PHARMAC's own website states:

*To ensure safe prescribing and dispensing, it is paramount that clinicians are familiar with the medicine precautions, contraindications, and interactions, and perform a thorough clinical assessment of each patient. This will require prescribers and pharmacists to work collaboratively on a case-by-case basis to ensure a full clinical evaluation and timely delivery of treatment.*

The College has significant concerns over back pocket scripts, in particular the potential risk of patients sharing medication, using the medication for other viral conditions which are not COVID-19 related, or more worryingly, being prescribed a contraindicated medication during the intervening time between receiving a script and filling it out.

To compare this to back pocket prescriptions for other medications, especially antibiotics, where we are actively discouraging the use of them, is misleading as these antiviral medications have significantly more potential serious interactions and side-effects.

The College is waiting for clarification of issues as to the endorsement criteria, and whether there will be change, how the process will work, and resolving the issues around this including the medico-legal risk. We have been told Health New Zealand is working through these issues.

While it is up to individual prescribers to decide if they will issue a back pocket script, we are recommending at this point that members hold off on prescribing in this way until the issues we have raised are clarified, and there is clear guidance from Health New Zealand and PHARMAC on the issuing of these scripts.

[Here is a statement from the Medical Protection Society](#) released this morning, and the [Medical Council Safe Prescribing Guidelines](#) for reference.

We would recommend all prescribers re-familiarise themselves with the [Medical Council's guidelines](#).

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