

Helping patients take their medication

**Are pharmacies in
Wokingham
Borough
supporting residents
assessed as needing
medication
compliance aids
(MCAs)?**

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Introduction

What is a medication compliance aid (MCA)?

Medication compliance aids are a way of dispensing medication for those people who have difficulty remembering to take it due to cognitive impairment or who have physical conditions (such as arthritis or MS) that prevent them from opening packaging. The brand names Dosette® Nomad®, Venalink® and Medidose® are commonly used. The use of MCAs appears to be increasing nationally. (BMJ 2018) <https://www.bmj.com/content/362/bmj.k2801.full>

The medication is packaged by the pharmacist into time slots for 7 days of the week. With some patients taking multiple medications of different doses throughout the day it can be a lifeline.

Before receiving a prescription for an MCA the patient must have a medication review with their GP surgery. The provider will consider other options to help the patient take their medication such as easy read labels before issuing a prescription for an MCA. (The Pharmaceutical Journal, 2019) <https://www.pharmaceutical-journal.com/news-and-analysis/features/are-we-dispensing-too-many-multicompartiment-compliance-aids/20206131.article?firstPass=false>



What prompted this project?

Healthwatch Wokingham Borough were contacted by Age UK Berkshire about a client who had been assessed as needing a medication compliance aid (MCA) but was unable to find a pharmacy to supply her with her medication in this way. Age UK Berkshire's preliminary investigations had led them to believe that this was not just an isolated incident.

Stories we heard

Miss M is 78 and lives alone. She needs a lot of different tablets for various long-term conditions, and previously received her regular medication in a Nomad pack from her local pharmacy in Wokingham. But when she came home from a recent hospital stay she found things had changed - her pharmacy has said it can't provide this service anymore.

Mrs A (86 year old) also discovered she can't order her medications in a medication compliance aid as she did previously. The pharmacist at her GP surgery advised that she had to find a [different] pharmacist which could do it. But she can't find a pharmacy in Wokingham - they have all said they are at capacity and cannot fulfil her prescription in this way. Age UK Berkshire have found a pharmacy in Twyford who are able to do it. But the charity is now having to collect the prescription from Twyford and bring it to Mrs A because she's outside their delivery area.

'I'm really struggling to see and open the medicine packs, and so worried that I'm going to take the wrong pill at the wrong time. Having the easy packs meant I could clearly see what I had to take when. Now I'm worried and confused.'

Mrs M, aged 78

What we did

Healthwatch Wokingham carried out an audit of the pharmacies in Wokingham Borough to understand if this was an issue affecting other vulnerable residents across the area, and assess its extent.

During July and August 2019, we visited or telephoned 28 pharmacies to ask them if they continue to offer MCAs to patients who have been assessed and, if not, the reasons.

Wokingham Pharmacy
Boots Pharmacy, Market Place,
Wokingham
Rose Street Pharmacy
Morrisons Pharmacy, Woosehill
Tesco Pharmacy, Wokingham
Lloyds Pharmacy, Sainsburys, Winnersh
Swallowfield Medical Practice
Jats Pharmacy
Finchampstead Pharmacy
Dukes Pharmacy
McPharlands Pharmacy
Lloyds Pharmacy, Crowthorne
Day Lewis Pharmacy, Lower Earley
Asda Pharmacy, Lower Earley

Boots Pharmacy, Lower Earley
Boots Pharmacy, Early
Shinfield Pharmacy
Boots Pharmacy, Woodley
Day Lewis Pharmacy, Woodley
Superdrug, Woodley
Lloyds Pharmacy, Woodley
Day Lewis Pharmacy, Sonning Common
Day Lewis Pharmacy, Twyford
Fields Pharmacy
Newdays Pharmacy
Lloyds Pharmacy, Wargrave
Lloyds Pharmacy, Binfield
Day Lewis Pharmacy, Spencers Wood

What we learnt

Extent of issue

Our audit revealed that the majority of pharmacies were not taking any new customers who require MCAs. This applies to the whole of Wokingham town, Earley and Lower Earley, Spencers Wood, Swallowfield, Woodley, Sonning, and Winnersh. Three pharmacies did not offer MCAs at all, even for existing customers.

There are pockets of the Borough where new and existing patients could still access MCAs: these were in Twyford, Crowthorne, Finchampstead, and Wargrave.

Reasons given by pharmacies

We heard about the problems that pharmacists face with providing this service.

a) Dispensing time

All pharmacies - even those still taking on new MCA customers - spoke about the length of time it takes to provide a MCA prescription.

It can take an hour to provide prescription medication in a MCA pack compared to five to ten minutes to dispense prescription medication in standard packaging. This is because you have to remove tablets from blister packs and then fill the NOMAD pack, and it also requires extra checking by another member of staff.



b) Staffing issues

Eight of the pharmacies told us that staff shortages were behind their decision to stop offering MCAs to new customers. They did not envisage this being resolved in the near future.

"We aren't able to accept any new MCAs being issued even when someone has been assessed as being in need. This is due to lack of staff, and the time it takes to make up these prescriptions."

c) Financial pressures

Other pharmacies cited the higher cost of providing MCAs compared to medications dispensed in the standard way.

"Profit margins have evaporated and due to cost of resource and time to do these packs it is becoming difficult for pharmacies to justify doing [MCAs]."

Pharmacies highlighted the fact that despite the extra staff time required, they did not receive any more funding for MCAs than normal prescriptions.

d) Concerns about MCAs - error-prone and disempowering?

Only one pharmacy cited concerns over the safety and effectiveness of MCAs in explaining their decision to stop taking on new MCA customers.

"We believe that [MCAs] pose a risk due to error in filling the packs and too many people don't understand what medication they are taking and what it's for. We would rather educate the patient than provide [MCA] packs."

e) Managability ~ storage space and GP prescribing periods

" GPs are causing issues by prescribing too far in advance. They are supposed to give a seven-day prescription for MCAs, but they often give two months. We do not have storage space for this volume."

MCAs take up not just more staff time but more physical space compared to standard packaging. Several pharmacies highlighted the importance of GPs prescribing MCAs for shorter, more manageable periods of time.

" We do not have capacity to take on new [MCA] patients.....unless the GP provides the pharmacy with weekly prescriptions rather than monthly."

"We don't have the storage space or enough staff to manage.... when GPs prescribe monthly."

One pharmacy reported that they used to get weekly prescriptions for MCAs until approximately 18 months ago when they started to receive monthly ones instead. They told Healthwatch Wokingham they thought that the GP surgery might have been following a directive it had been given.

f) Safeguarding patients

We also heard concerns that the time it takes to produce these packs could compromise the pharmacy's obligations to new and existing patients.

" [MCAs] can take up an hour to do and uses lots of resource.... We have a legal obligation to provide medicines to patients on time. If we can't do that because we have taken on too much work, then this becomes a safeguarding issue."



Smaller pharmacies temporarily cushioning the blow

When we spoke to the pharmacists, it became clear that the smaller, independent providers were working hard to try to provide MCAs for their customers. Some are even taking on new customers from neighbouring areas where no local provision exists.

This is an additional pressure on small businesses and most indicated they would not be able to do this indefinitely.

"We are still taking new [MCA] requests at the moment. However, we are taking on new customers from as far as Woodley and Winnersh who can't get [MCA] packs there. We don't get paid for making up the packs and generally deliver these to the customer, for which we aren't paid either. If we get many more requests, we are going to have to start charging new patients."

Conclusions

The majority of pharmacies in Wokingham Borough are not taking any new customers who require MCAs. The most common concerns voiced by pharmacies were dispensing time, resource constraints, manageability (storage space and GP prescribing periods) and fulfilling their legal obligation to patients. There seemed to be a genuine desire to help those who are vulnerable and need assistance with their medication, but many are unable to provide this service. Key issues we identified were:

- 1) **Lack of time and staff resource.** This is potentially linked to the reduction in government funding of pharmacies which is due to remain static for the next five years - <https://www.chemistanddruggist.co.uk/news/dh-bases-frozen-pharmacy-funding-belief-there-are-still-too-many>
- 2) **The GPs prescribing for longer periods of time** rather than weekly. This caused two issues; storage space for the completed MCAs and, arguably, funding as we believe pharmacies are paid per prescription.
- 3) **Lack of information:** We found that many pharmacies were not aware of capacity locally (or lack of it), so they are directing patients to other providers who are also unable to provide MCAs. Our table at Appendix 1 shows availability of MCAs by pharmacies across the Borough. In many areas there are no pharmacies accepting new MCA customers- yet patients would need to contact each pharmacy directly to be able to find this out.



The lack of choice and support with medication for some of our most vulnerable residents causes Healthwatch Wokingham concern. Small, independent pharmacies, charities and organisations such as Age UK Berkshire are helping people currently affected but this is likely to become a bigger issue as time goes on.

Pharmacists are contractually obliged to make 'reasonable adjustments' for those patients covered by the Equality Act 2010 in order to support patients with a long term disability access their medication as instructed. Although we heard that MCAs are not always the preferred solution, if an assessment has been made by a GP that an individual is in need then a MCA should be available to them.

We believe this could be a national issue as we understand the Director of Adult Social Care at Reading Borough Council is aware of similar issues in Reading. We will pass our findings onto Healthwatch England.

We recommend that the CCG, Council, Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Health and Wellbeing board look into this issue further.

Healthwatch Wokingham Borough
October 2019

Response received from key organisation 1

"Thank you for the report. Another excellent rounded view of the problem that our residents and primary colleagues are facing.

As you are aware this is a national problem which the CCG, both as Berkshire West and jointly with the BOB IC, have escalated nationally."

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