

08 Promoting Self Care and Self Medication

Situation

According to the World Health Organization, self-care is “what people do for themselves to establish and maintain health, prevent and deal with illness,”¹ which includes consideration of a healthy diet, exercise, and hygiene, as well as practicing self-medication.

Self-medication is defined as “the selection and use of medicines by individuals to treat self-recognized illnesses or symptoms,” which includes use of over-the-counter (OTC) drugs to mitigate mild illness or injury as a means of self-health control.

With the aim of realizing a healthy-aging society, the Health/Medical Care Working Group of the Regulatory Reform Council has strived to put in place regulatory reforms based on three principles with people’s security and safety in mind:

1. improvement of convenience;
2. economic revitalization through improvements in medical care and welfare; and
3. the funding of the health insurance system.

As a measure to promote self-care / self-medication, the first step in 2013 enabled the marketing of all OTC drugs on the Internet, and in 2014, the second step was the submission of a report on the early establishment of a system to transfer certain point-of-care (POC) diagnostic products from the medical insurance system to the OTC market. The revised Pharmaceutical Affairs Act which came into force in 2014 permits the marketing of all OTC drugs on the Internet. Combined, these steps have created an environment for the promotion of self-medication.

The 2013 “Economic Growth Strategy” targeted “healthy-aging,” including promoting industry efforts aimed at extending people’s health as they grow older. The June 2013 “Japan Revitalization Strategy” promoted the use of

pharmacies and pharmacists as a community-based hub for health information through the provision of advice on the appropriate use of OTC drugs as well as consultation services and health information.²

The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) 2013 “Drug Industry Vision” indicated that community-based pharmacists and drugstores should respond appropriately to the needs of the community and should provide patient compliance instructions, consultations, recommendations to seek medical care and advice in connection to the OTC drugs they sell.³

In promoting the transfer of designated prescription drugs to the OTC category (switch to OTC), the Revised Japan Revitalization Strategy of June 2014 targeted:

1. conducting expedited reviews of each product application using foreign data as a reference;
2. adopting measures to set targets for regulatory review periods at the Pharmaceuticals and Medical Devices Agency (PMDA), in order to shorten review times, and to expand the consultation system; and
3. establishing a switch to OTC process that reflects the views of stakeholders, including consumers and the healthcare industry, using as a reference case studies from outside Japan, including from the United States.⁴

Current Policy

The Ministry of Finance 2014 Tax Reform Outline recommended that the tax system be reviewed so that it enhances the delivery of effective preventive care services and recognizes the role and function of pharmacies in contributing to the future promotion of self-medication.⁵

To enhance the function of primary pharmacies, a total of JPY239 million was allocated in the FY2014 government budget for programs in all 47 prefectures pertaining to the “Promotion

Project for Health Information Hubs by Exploiting Pharmacies/Pharmacists.” In this Project, the Japanese government provides a menu of items that can be selected by each community based on needs, in order to promote and broaden self-medication and home-based medical care.⁶ The MHLW will also start an initiative in the autumn of 2015 under which community based pharmacies with enhanced consultation systems and facilities will be identified.⁷

In order to prepare an environment and system that enables people to freely seek health consultations and that further promotes self-medication, the MHLW included in the FY2015 Tax Reform Proposal a provision that would allow a real estate acquisition tax reduction for small and medium-sized pharmacies that have an appropriate marketing system in place. The MHLW also proposed that a tax deduction be established for the purchase of “pharmacist’s intervention required drugs” and OTC drugs in an annual amount of JPY25,000 or more for households with up to a maximum of JPY500,000 in income.⁸ In response to this proposal, the FY 2015 Tax Reform Outline specified that these are matters “to be discussed.”⁹

The Future of Self-Care and Self-Medication

Japan has a declining birth rate and an aging population. Each and every citizen must undertake self-care and self-medication, subject to the flexible development of appropriate policies, in order for a financially sound national health insurance system to be passed to the next generation. Because these issues are important and affect future social security benefits and national financial affairs, the promotion of initiatives aimed at enhancing the health of the people, such as “Healthy Japan 21 (Second Version)” should be encourage and supported.

To realize the goal of healthy-aging, the enhancement of the health of each and every

inhabitant and worker in the community is exactly what self-care is about. Self-care should be promoted by a Plan-Do-Check-Act (“PDCA”) methodology that encourages the Japanese people to lead a healthy life in order to prevent lifestyle diseases. This can be done by encouraging people to take advantage of various cancer screenings, immunizations, and health checkups and health counseling guidance offered by local governments or health insurance societies, which would lead to appropriate aftercare and self-medication based on a doctor’s diagnosis.

Furthermore, in order for community inhabitants to approach self-medication as part of a PDCA methodology and to achieve better health literacy, local governments, prefectural and district medical associations, medical institutions and community pharmacies must provide appropriate health education. If self-medication is not accompanied by inappropriate health literacy, patients could hold misconceptions and make incorrect choices, leading to mistaken self-diagnoses, in appropriate self-medication or even result in not receiving timely treatment, which in all cases could lead to serious implications for the health of the patient.

While financial and social security demands should be addressed, it is desirable for local governments to act as the facilitators to promote healthy aging by applying best practices in self-care and self-medication as part of their integrated health care programs. The PDCA methodology could be achieved through health education and aftercare, including by having health care personnel and institutions hold community medical care conferences open to local inhabitants. Useful information could be shared through presentations by community health centers, medical associations, dental associations, pharmaceutical associations, nursing associations, hospital and family doctors, pharmacists and clinical psychologists to name but a few.

Promotion of self-care and self-medication and improvement in the health of each and every citizen through this kind of organic cooperation and the use of community based health resources would improve health literacy and contribute to the appropriate allocation of Japan's social security resources.

Recommendations

- In order for self-care and self-medication to be smoothly promoted as a part of the PDCA cycle function of community health care, each local government should assume responsibility for acting as a facilitator to promote community health care by participating in community "health management," for example, by establishing and operating conferences between the inhabitants and health care personnel who undertake community medical care.
- As an incentive for inhabitants to maintain and promote their own health, the purchase of OTC drugs (non-prescription drugs) should be deductible against personal income.
- The MHLW should promote the transfer of drugs from the prescription category to the non-prescription category (switch to OTC) of those prescription drugs that have been

used for an extended period with established efficacy and a proven safety record.

- In order to expedite regulatory reviews of drugs targeted for a switch to OTC, the current review system should be improved so that foreign efficacy and safety data are actively utilized. In particular, the required volume of clinical trial data should be reduced or eliminated by utilizing existing clinical data, referencing analysis data and referring to appropriate use data from pharmacies, as is the case in Europe and in the United States.
- In order to expedite regulatory reviews of quasi-drugs, the review systems should also be improved so that foreign efficacy and safety data and data from past cases are utilized, instead of requiring new clinical trials to be conducted in Japan for new quasi-drugs whose safety and efficacy have already been confirmed in Europe and in the United States.

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