

❖ GENERIC MEDICATIONS

No doubt when you go into a pharmacy you are asked at one point or another whether or not you want the generic brand. For some people that visit the pharmacy a lot they may get really sick of being asked the question! I know that some people don't really mind and others are not too sure what the difference is.

Essentially when an original product comes on the market, the manufacturer has a 'patent' which means that they have 'exclusive' rights to producing it. This allows them to recover their costs of testing, research, development and the marketing...which can be very expensive! During this time they build a name for themselves and have a 'monopoly' on the market for that particular medication.

Once this patent runs out then this allows other manufacturers to produce their generic brand of the medication. They still need to pass it through the TGA and be tested to make sure that it is 'bioequivalent' to the original medication. This means that the company needs to prove that it is released and absorbed *within* the TGA's standards to be able to call it the same as the originator. Although there are some circumstances where it is best to stick with the one brand such as some blood thinning and epileptic medications as even a tiny change can affect your condition.

The generic brand may have different 'filler' ingredients to make up the tablet (which you should ask what they are if you have allergies to certain things), and may or may not look the same as the original tablet depending on the 'legal' rights...all very technical! But the active ingredient needs to be equivalent to be allowed to be sold in Australia.

Some original brands have a 'brand price premium' which the government will not subsidise, so the generic brand is cheaper. Sometimes there is a huge difference between the price of the two and can save you hundreds of dollars throughout the year. Other times there is no difference in price between the two products to you as the consumer.

When there is no difference in price, I often get asked 'Why should I take the generic if the original is the same price?' My response to them is this; the generic medication is much cheaper to the government in terms of what they have to subsidise. So, if they can save money this way it will allow other medications to go onto the PBS that the government can't afford to list yet. It is helping our healthcare system and putting less pressure on our PBS and hopefully can allow it to continue despite our aging population.

It may seem that this is not 'your' or 'my' problem. But if the government cannot sustain this PBS (Pharmaceutical Benefits System), then either in our lifetime or our children's lifetime our health system may be completely reformed and we may no longer be able to afford the good quality of healthcare that we get today. There is only so much our tax can be raised by, and the government has already tightened how much they pay pharmacies for the medicines (which are taking a toll on the bottom-line of most pharmacies today)...that eventually there may be a drastic change to overhaul their expenses.

Apart from price and the bottom line of the cost of health care, knowledge about generic medication is necessary because of the confusion people may have about what medications they are taking. If one only identifies with the 'brand' name and not the medication/drug name, then there is a risk of double dosing should this education not be present. I believe that everyone who takes any medication should have the basic knowledge of what the drug name is and take responsibility for what they taking each day so that the risk of toxicity is reduced. Tablets may look completely different but contain the same active ingredient and with so many banners of pharmacy and consumers shopping everywhere based on convenience rather than 'mono-pharmacy' as what was originally done, there is a high chance of getting mixed up as well as the possibility of full education not being imparted. As Dentists too, you have the professional obligation to know full well what your patient is taking, what it is for and what it may be interacting with to give them and yourself the best dental treatment and outcome as possible for your patient.

So, what I am trying to say is that the 'annoying question' of being asked about generic medications, actually should make you think about what this whole thing means to you. Take the opportunity to talk to your doctor and pharmacist to get more information.