Abstract:
Health systems are under increasing financial pressure due to various challenges such as ageing populations, the rise of noncommunicable diseases and a greater demand from patients and consumers. Healthcare spending outpaces global GDP growth by 2.7%. Minor ailments account for a great proportion of doctors’ consultations and generate a huge potential for cost savings in avoided doctors’ visits, drug costs and lost productivity. A European study of 2004 estimated savings of over Euro 16 Billion if only 5% of care would be shifted to self-medication. A more recent Australian Study of 2014 estimated savings of AUD 3.8 billion in avoided doctor’s visits and AUD 6.5 billion savings in lost productivity, totalling a potential savings amount of AUD 10.4 billion. Although this potential for savings from increased self-management of minor ailments is already significant, the potential for savings is far greater if the scope of self-medication were extended to the prevention and management of long term conditions. Healthcare systems should engage, educate and empower people to managing their health rather than focus on treating (minor) illness. More activated and engaged patients have better health outcomes\(^1\). Studies showed that patients with a low activation score incurred up to 21% higher costs than patients with the highest activation score. Healthcare planning should therefore take into account the overall public health benefit of self-care and self-medication as well as the potential cost savings due to OTC medication. Appropriate regulation for classification of medicines is based on transparency, accountability, proportionality, efficacy and simplification assessing benefits and risks. The ‘Brass Model’\(^2\) provides a good methodology for assessing non-prescription medicines allowing evidence-based and transparent decision-making. It allows for a comprehensive identification of relevant benefit and risk attributes for specific nonprescription drug candidates and facilitates early agreement between sponsors and regulators on most important characteristics and important data gaps, thus providing an approach to an integrated benefit-risk assessment.

In summary, the concept of self-care and the availability of OTC medicines encourage and support people to manage their health and therefore contribute to the efficiency and sustainability of healthcare systems. An appropriate framework that supports safe and appropriate self-care and self-medication needs to be in place in particular through a proportionate regulation of OTC medicines.

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\(^1\) Health Policy Briefs, Health Affairs, February 2013