

ID: 663469

Free but Valuable: The Economic Significance of Services Provided by Portuguese Pharmacies

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Objetivos (Objectives):

Besides dispensing medicines, pharmacies render other services including advice on health problems and on the best use of medicines; detecting problems in patients' medications; counseling on nutrition, etc. The majority of these services is free. Up to now, the volume and costs of these services in Portugal were unknown. This paper presents 2008 estimates for the volume of pharmacy interventions and their economic value.

Metodologia (Methodology):

The data necessary for the estimates came from two surveys conducted in 2008. The first survey covered pharmacies and was designed to estimate the volume and cost of the free pharmaceutical interventions in community pharmacies in Portugal. For a week pharmacists and staff kept a daily record of all free services provided as well as the time spent in them. National totals were based on the survey results and its sampling rate. Costs estimates were based on the average wages for pharmacists and staff.

The second survey covered the general population. Respondents answered a set of questions (choice experiments) designed to elicit their monetary valuation or willingness to pay for a few typical services provided for free at community pharmacies. A "conjoint analysis" was used to produce the "willingness to pay" estimates.

Resultados (Results):

We estimate a total of 38,8 million free pharmacy interventions in 2008, 3,7 interventions per inhabitant. The top three pharmacy interventions were advice on non-prescription medicines, advice on prescription-only medicines and counseling related to point-of-care measurements and monitoring (cholesterol, pregnancy, etc.) and they used 2,8 million hours of work, about 13% of the total hours of work, at a cost of € 54 million. This cost was equivalent to 20% of the pharmacies' gross income. We estimated the willingness to pay for the three main pharmacy interventions by conjoint analysis. The aggregate value of the services provided was estimated at € 76,5 million. The net value, from society's perspective, for the three interventions was estimated to be € 51 million.

Conclusões (Conclusions):

We found the volume of services provided at no charge to be significant, as were the resulting pharmacies' costs. The benefits to consumers were even larger generating a substantial net benefit to society.