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## Exploring community pharmacists' views around HRT and the menopause

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*Introduction:* The number of women in England prescribed HRT has increased dramatically in the last seven years.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, from 2018, HRT product shortages have resulted in the release of Serious Shortage Protocols

allowing community pharmacists to supply alternative HRT products where appropriate.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, in 2022, the first over-the-counter medication for vaginal atrophy in menopause was licensed.<sup>3</sup> With so many recent changes, it seemed an opportune time to determine community pharmacists' views on the topic.

*Aim:* The aim of this study was to explore community pharmacists' views around HRT and the menopause.

*Methods:* A qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews was chosen to allow for exploration of views. A list of community pharmacies from Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire was obtained from the NHS website. They were grouped into independent and multiple pharmacies in both urban and rural areas. Twenty pharmacies were then randomly selected from across the lists, emailed and invited to participate in the study; a participant information sheet and consent form was attached. This was followed up with a telephone call one week later, and a day and time for interview was agreed. Telephone interviews were undertaken, with consent obtained verbally, and the interview digitally recorded. The interview guide was developed based on the literature review and aim of the study. The guide addressed experiences of patient queries regarding HRT and the menopause, views of the OTC vaginal tablet and their confidence in discussing menopause with patients. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed. Ethical approval was obtained from Keele School of Pharmacy and Bioengineering Ethics Committee.

*Results:* Nine interviews were undertaken in October 2022, lasting 10 to 15 minutes. Five interviewees were male, five from urban areas, all from different companies and experience ranged from 3 months to 45 years. Four themes emerged from the transcripts, namely: increase in queries; managing shortages; lack of knowledge on Gina®; and limited professional interest in the topic. Patients were found to rarely ask about menopausal symptoms, with most queries related to risks associated with HRT or advice on various formulations. All pharmacists found dealing with shortages to be time-consuming and potentially stressful. Many of the pharmacists had not heard of the new vaginal tablet and did not stock it. Those who did, felt it was expensive and unlikely to sell. All stated they would like further training on the menopause but only one would consider specialising as a future area of prescribing.

*Discussion/Conclusion:* This was a small study with relatively short interviews, due to the time constraints facing working pharmacists. Despite this, similarity in responses suggest that data saturation may have been reached. This study confirms previous reports of increasing queries relating to HRT, particularly around shortages, and the stress associated with dealing with them. The pharmacists stated they would like further training on the topic, although CPPE packages on menopause are available. Despite the increased attention and prescribing of HRT, there was little desire to specialise and prescribe in this area; this should be explored further.

**Keywords:** Community pharmacists; HRT; menopause; views

## References

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