



**BPC Fact Sheet:
Therapeutic Substitution
April 2009**

BC PharmaCare and Therapeutic Substitution

In 2003, BC's PharmaCare program implemented a therapeutic substitution for patients using proton pump inhibitors. This policy has been strengthened by the new Interim Pharmacy agreement as pharmacists now have the power to change a prescription, whether it is a brand name or generic, without a doctor's approvalⁱ.

What impact does therapeutic substitution mean for patients in BC?

For patients, this policy affects their eligibility for financial reimbursement or coverage by the public drug plan. Therapeutic substitution is a type of reference-based pricing policy. A policy of therapeutic substitution affects patients starting new medications, as well as patients already on medications. Under therapeutic substitution policies, if a patient is starting a medication for the first time, they are forced to begin with the reference medication, even if this was not the one prescribed by their doctor. Or, if patients are already taking a medication, a policy of therapeutic substitution forces them to make a medically unnecessary switch from the medication prescribed by their doctor to another medication that is chemically different, but within the same therapeutic class of medicationsⁱⁱ. Therefore, even if you are well managed on your current medication, you could be forced to use another medication that your doctor did not prescribe.

Worse yet, under the current therapeutic substitution policy in BC, even if a patient chooses to pay the full cost of the drug their doctor has prescribed, this does not count toward the Fair PharmaCare deductible that all citizens who rely on the public drug plan have to payⁱⁱⁱ.

Research shows that while such policies are often touted as effective cost management strategies, they can result in increased costs to the health system and decreased health outcomes for patients^{iv}.



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Better Pharmacare Coalition Concerns:

The Better Pharmacare Coalition has serious concerns about the impact of therapeutic substitution and other cost containment measures on the health of BC patients and the health system:

- Patients are being denied best care and treatment options because BC PharmaCare restricts coverage in many cases to the least expensive or 'best deal' medications and devices.
- Experts are not able to prescribe the medications they feel are most effective to their patients. Instead pharmacists, who do not see patients and do not have any clinical expertise in treating patients, are able to override the knowledge and expertise of that patient's own doctor.
- Therapeutic substitution is a short-term solution that simply pushes costs to other parts of the healthcare system and generates negative health outcomes for patients.

Better Pharmacare Coalition Position:

- The Better Pharmacare Coalition feels that the health of BC patients comes first. Increasing choice enhances patient care; limiting choice to innovative medications flies in the face of patient individuality.
- Ensuring patients get the right medicine at the right time should be the priority of the health care system. Therapeutic substitution undermines this principle.
- The BC Government must discontinue the practice of trying to pick "winners and losers" in determining which drugs in which category should be covered and by how much. Those are choices to be made together by doctors and patients, the people who know the medical and experiential circumstances, the experts who have the education, training and experience to make such judgments.

ⁱ http://www.bcpharmacists.org/library/A-About_Us/A-8_Key_Initiatives/PPP58_Brochure.pdf

ⁱⁱ Gainor et al. (2003): 654.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Ibid; Gaebel (2008).