



DISPENSING LIMITS, DELIVERY SERVICES CURB MEDICATION PANIC BUYING EARLY IN PANDEMIC

EMBARGOED UNTIL 12:01am Monday 3 May 2021

POLICIES introduced in March 2020 offset panic buying of medications at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, proving medication supply can be safeguarded, according to research published today by the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

Dr Mustafa Mian, a physician at Alfred Health in Melbourne, and colleagues analysed Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme date-of-supply data to model medication dispensing during January 2016 to December 2019, by month, separately for all PBS prescriptions, the 10 medications most frequently dispensed during the 2018–19 financial year, hydroxychloroquine, and dexamethasone. These models, which accounted for long term trends and seasonal changes, were used to predict expected dispensing during January – June 2020 and compared it with actual dispensing rates during this period.

“The number of prescriptions dispensed during March 2020 was significantly higher than predicted (4.80 million more prescriptions, +18.5%), but significantly lower in April (2.28 million fewer prescriptions, –9.2%) and May (2.08 million fewer prescriptions; –8.1%); there was no significant difference in June 2020 (988 778 fewer prescriptions, –3.8%),” Mian and colleagues found.

“A similar pattern applied to the 10 most dispensed medications; the increase in the number of hydroxychloroquine prescriptions dispensed in March was particularly large (24 286 more prescriptions, +95.5%).”

Mian and colleagues wrote that the increased dispensing of prescription medications in March 2020 was consistent with the general panic buying reported early in the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to the March increase, the Australian government introduced dispensing limits of one month’s supply of medications if shortages would have serious health consequences. That was balanced with services to assist susceptible patients to isolate themselves, including the COVID-19 home medicines service which funded home delivery of prescription medications by community pharmacies and Australia Post; as well as funding for telehealth to facilitate remote prescribing.

“Our findings indicate that medication supply can be safeguarded from panic dispensing by a range of regulatory policies combined with medication services for vulnerable people,” Mian and colleagues concluded.

“This may be particularly important for ensuring equitable access to medications for treating COVID-19. The risk of further COVID-19 outbreaks underscores the importance of maintaining these policies and services.”

All MJA media releases are open access and can be found at: <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/media>

Please remember to credit *The MJA*.

The *Medical Journal of Australia* is a publication of the Australian Medical Association.

The statements or opinions that are expressed in the MJA reflect the views of the authors and do not represent the official policy of the AMA or the MJA unless that is so stated.

CONTACTS: Dr Mustafa Mian
 Alfred Health
 Email: mustafa.k.mian@outlook.com