

Guidance on the reporting, recording and investigation of suspected prescription fraud for Community Pharmacies.

Background

Health and Social Care (HSC) as an organisation has a zero tolerance approach to fraud. It is the current position that all incidents of suspected prescription fraud will be examined by Counter Fraud Services (CFS) and the appropriate clinical leads within the Strategic Planning and Performance Group (SPPG) to provide assurance that HSC is meeting its statutory obligations in respect of patient safety and the safeguarding of public funds.

What is prescription fraud?

This term is used by CFS to refer to a group of related fraud offences that are committed by a small minority of service users within Northern Ireland. Typically these offences involve the person(s) practising some form of deception or forgery, or a combination of both in order to obtain medication in greater quantities than originally prescribed or to obtain medication that was not prescribed to them at all. The patient may either be obtaining the medication to consume themselves or to sell onto others.

What are the dangers?

This group of activities may seem at first glance to be of little importance as the actual cost of the medication obtained is usually of fairly low value but this is somewhat misleading.

The most common offence committed is Fraud by False Representation (S2 Fraud Act 2006) which is a criminal offence with potentially heavy penalties available, dependant on circumstances, to Judges at sentencing.

This is exacerbated by the potential for reputational damage to the HSC and individual practices and pharmacies if our systems and procedures allow a member of the public to obtain prescription drugs in quantities that are threatening to their health, and in extreme cases to their life.

This combination of criminal activity linked to potentially harmful activity means that the HSC must develop and enforce robust governance measures to limit the opportunities for this type of activity.

There is also the potential for risk to the perpetrator, either to their own health as a result of taking medication that was not prescribed for them or to the health of others if they are obtaining the medication for diversion to others.

How prescription fraud can occur

Within the Community Pharmacy setting, a number of methods of fraud can be employed by service users in order to obtain medication for which they have no legitimate or clinical requirement.

In many cases the fraud will pass unnoticed by the Community Pharmacist as there are no obvious irregularities with the presented prescription. These are normally prescriptions obtained by frauds against the Temporary Resident Scheme within a GP Practice. Prescription fraud cases will most likely be discovered in a Community Pharmacy as a result of physical alterations of a presented prescription or the presentation of handwritten scripts that are not completed correctly or that raise suspicion in some other manner such as spelling errors or incorrect abbreviations.

In situations of this nature, it will be most appropriate to follow all BSO/HSCB guidance regarding the dispensing of medication in the first instance and supplement this with the advice contained within this document. Fraud methods likely to be employed within a Community Pharmacy are as follows:-

False Details

This type of offence has a number of different variations all based on the same simple system of utilising entirely false or partially accurate information to practice a deception. The service user will present at the Pharmacy or more likely contact them by telephone. They will then provide information which appears plausible and attempt to obtain medication which they have no legitimate right of access to. This has in the past included masquerading as GP Practice staff, doctors or other patients. Their knowledge of correct procedures, jargon and patient identifiable information lends these conversations a note of authenticity which increases the chances of success.

Altered Prescriptions

This system is more straightforward and often detected as it involves the alteration of details on the issued prescription. This prescription may have been obtained in good faith or as a result of a deception in a GP Practice. In most cases, the numbers to be dispensed will be altered to increase the quantities/strength or extra medication will be added to the prescription. If however the perpetrator is knowledgeable about the systems and procedures employed by the Surgery and Pharmacy and does not alter the prescription in any radical way, it may well go undetected. When both methods (alteration and addition) are utilised together it can allow the most knowledgeable perpetrators to obtain significant quantities of medication which they have absolutely no clinical requirement or need for.

A number of cases of electronic prescriptions being altered have also been reported and in most cases, the persons involved have been knowledgeable enough of procedures to initial the changes with the prescribing GP's initials. This initialling allows the alterations a much greater chance of being accepted at the point of dispensing, thus ensuring they obtain their medication.

Warning signs of potential fraudulent activity

The table below outlines the warning signs of potential prescription fraud. While some of these examples alone do not necessarily indicate fraud is occurring, they should raise your suspicion and require further examination or explanation.

<i>The look and feel of a prescription</i>	Prescription forms are deliberately hard to copy, so false ones tend to stand out. Look for distinguishing features such as the serial number and watermark.
<i>Date of Issue</i>	Remember prescriptions must be presented for dispensing within certain timescales. There may be a genuine reason for having an old but still valid prescription however you should satisfy yourself as to the reason for the delay.
<i>Address of prescriber</i>	If you receive a prescription from a GP practice outside your area you should pay particular attention to the detail.
<i>Alterations or additions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Printed or hand-written prescriptions that have been manually altered, normally to increase quantity and/or strength of medication. • Hand written additions to a handwritten or printed script that are for one of the commonly abused medications. • Poorly spelt or laid out scripts that use incorrect dosage or other prescribing abbreviations that are not in keeping with the rest of the script.
<i>Signature</i>	You should know the signatures of the prescribers in your local area. If the signature looks unusual check with other prescriptions you may have or contact the prescriber if you have a concern.

Common drugs liable to misuse

The drugs requested are often benzodiazepines, analgesics and hypnotics such as:

Analgesics

Codeine
Dihydrocodeine
Gabapentin
Pregabalin/Lyrica
Tramadol
Ketamine

Benzodiazepines

Diazepam
Lorazepam
Lormetazepam
Midazolam
Nitrazepam
Temazepam

Hypnotics

Zopiclone
Zolpidem

Recommended actions where fraud is suspected

Consider taking steps to delay filling the prescription such as stating that you are unable to fill the script at the moment and would they mind coming back later to give you time to carry out the next few actions.

- Contact the Prescriber and establish if the prescription or information is accurate. If unable to speak to the Prescriber and you have strong suspicions about its validity, the medication should NOT be dispensed.
- If you are suspicious as to the validity of the prescription, consider taking a photocopy or scan of the script in case the person demands it back and you need to return it to avoid confrontation.
- Observe their demeanour and reaction to the above information. If they become agitated and/or ask for the prescription back or react in a manner out of proportion with the request, this may again be indicative of potential fraudulent activity.
- If you become suspicious of the validity of a telephone call from a GP Practice member of staff consider calling the Practice back to confirm the call. Obtain the Practice phone number from a trusted source and not the caller.
- Contact CFS during working hours to discuss your concerns and report the matter, if appropriate.
- Report all confirmed instances of alterations of prescriptions to the PSNI on 101 (or 999 in the case of an emergency), as they are criminal offences whether medication was obtained or not.
- Where medication has been dispensed take a photocopy of the prescription and keep the original for the PSNI or CFS as it will be required for any future prosecution. CFS will provide certification to ensure that any dispensed prescription will still be paid by BSO Pharmaceutical.
- Ensure that any CCTV that may have recorded the incident is retained and not routinely copied over. Also take steps to ensure that your CCTV is operating correctly and recording an accurate date and time on a regular basis.

- If you have dispensed the medication and only become aware of the fraud after dispensing:
 - Contact CFS and PSNI
 - Secure the original script and any Patient Medication Records (PMR)
 - Secure any relevant CCTV

CFS Fraud Alerts

When prescription fraud activity has been reported to CFS it will be assessed and if it is necessary a Fraud Alert will be disseminated to GP Practices, Community Pharmacies and OOH services.

If you receive a CFS Alert, this should be examined by an appropriate person within your pharmacy and the details checked against your records to establish if there is any correlation between the Alert and any medication you may have dispensed. Due to the nature of this type of fraud, we would ask that you conduct these checks even if the Alert does not relate to your geographical area. Should you discover anything that gives you cause for concern please contact CFS as below.

How to report suspected prescription fraud

If you suspect that fraudulent activity may be occurring please contact Counter Fraud Services on **0800 096 33 96** to discuss your concern or complete our online reporting form at <https://cfps.hscni.net/report/reportfmr/>

All confirmed instances of prescription fraud should be reported to the Police on 101, or 999 in the case of an emergency.