

Free Prescription Charges Speaking Notes

Good afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen, and thank you for taking the time to join me in this marvellous building today. I am delighted to be here in the Cancer Centre, where treatment, care and hope are brought to so many people by dedicated teams of cancer professionals.

When Aneurin Bevan was appointed Minister for Health in 1945 he was handed the onerous task of establishing a new National Health Service. In Northern Ireland that same daunting remit fell on the shoulders of William Grant, as Minister of Health and Local Government in the Northern Ireland Parliament and, I am proud to say, a fellow Unionist.

I do not have to tell you what an incredible and unique achievement the creation of the Health Service was – 60 years ago this year, as you know. For all of those who were attempting to recover from the ravages of war, the knowledge that they no longer had to face the anxiety of having to find the money for the care and treatment of their family and loved ones must have been a huge blessing and relief.

Cradle to grave healthcare, free at the point of use, was the ethos of Bevan's NHS. It is hardly surprising, then, that this principled man resigned from the Cabinet just three years later. The reason – the introduction of prescription charges for dental care and spectacles.

Charging for prescriptions, and rising charges, has remained a contentious issue throughout the UK ever since. However, things are changing. In Wales, as you know, all prescription charges have been abolished since April last year. Scotland too is committed to free prescriptions by 2011.

You will also have heard last week Gordon Brown's announcement to the New Labour Conference of his intention to abolish prescription charges for cancer sufferers from next year. This was certainly good news for cancer sufferers and their families, but not for those suffering from other serious conditions which require long-term medication.

I can well understand his decision. I think that no other issue since I have taken up post as Minister for Health has prompted more people to write to me than the perceived inequities on the prescription charging system.

My post-bag is heavy with letters from cancer patients and their advocates, and sufferers from other long-term conditions such as MS, heart disease and arthritis, calling for relief from the costs of their prescriptions that are placing real burdens on their household finances, particularly now with the 'credit crunch'. When people are faced with escalating costs for food and fuel, what decisions about their medication are they likely to take?

I too have heard MacMillan Cancer Care, and others, report how cancer sufferers across Northern Ireland are having to ask their pharmacists to prioritise the items on their prescriptions as they can't afford them all.

I have to tell you that I regard that as completely unacceptable in what passes for a civilised society in 2008. I am not prepared to preside over a situation where people have to choose between their medication and their food or heating their home. It was Bevan himself who said.

“no society can legitimately call itself civilized if a sick person is denied medical aid because of lack of means”.

The introduction of free prescriptions was one of my Party's manifesto commitments. It was also one of my earliest Assembly debates, with members calling for a cost and benefit Review for the purpose of abolishing health prescription charges, as Wales has done.

That Review has been carried out, I have considered its findings and today I want to set out what I have planned to do.

The Review Group's report, which I am putting on my Department's website, looked at the charging issue in the round. The Group paid particular attention to the main exemption categories – age, medical condition and income – and offered a range of options on how to proceed.

These included:

- Widening the range of conditions eligible for exemption
- Widening the range of patients qualifying for exemption; for example students, or the terminally ill
- Restricting what may be prescribed
- Reducing the cost of pre-payment certificates

- Making more prescribed medicines available over the counter.

I have examined the Report and its findings very carefully. From its analysis it is obvious to me that there are stark inequities, particularly in relation to the medical exemption, that partial solutions will not resolve in any satisfactory way.

So I am delighted to announce today that it is my intention, subject to Executive agreement in the fullness of time, to reduce and then to abolish prescription charging in Northern Ireland.

As from 1 January 2009 the price of prescriptions will be reduced to £3. The price of pre-payment certificates will be reduced accordingly.

And then, as from 1 April 2010, prescriptions will be free of charge in Northern Ireland.

In coming to this decision, I had to consider carefully the consequences of any change, even a minor change, to the charging regime in Northern Ireland.

At the moment, the income from prescription charges amounts to around £13 million each year. £13 million, although only a small proportion – 3½% - of our total drugs bill, is a lot of money and of course I cannot disregard that. It is used to fund vital health and social care services for everyone, and would be lost if free prescriptions were introduced.

A further concern which needed to be examined as part of this review was the issue of greater demand – would people be likely to want more on prescription if it is free? I talked to my counterpart Edwina Hart about this, and the Wales experience to date does not seem to indicate a significant latent demand emerging.

Together with my officials, I have considered my financial position very carefully and have concluded that the costs of free prescriptions can be found from within my existing budget. This will be made possible due to increased efficiencies. I can confirm, however, that no existing service within my financial control will lose out on funding as a result of this move, and I have had to ask for no additional funding from elsewhere in the Block.

However, we will have to be vigilant to ensure that the drugs bill does not rise unnecessarily as a result of this decision. I will be encouraging healthcare professionals to prescribe sensibly. I will also need the support of all of the people in Northern Ireland to make it work, and by that I mean that we must all act responsibly with regard to demanding prescriptions. Although there may not be a charge, prescription drugs will still come at an opportunity cost for spending elsewhere in the health service.

So I will obviously be monitoring the drugs budget very carefully in the coming months and years to see whether other steps will need to be taken to keep the overall budget under control.

I know I can count on your support to implement this important benefit to the people of Northern Ireland, and I am equally confident that they will respond sensibly and responsibly.

I believe this is a significant step towards Bevan's principle of a health service free at the point of use. It is also a testament to what can be achieved by a local administration responding to local needs and wishes. The people of Northern Ireland deserve no less from their own Government.

Thank you.

