

Shortages of inexpensive essential medicines



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“Shortages of medicines” refers to the insufficient access to promising new compounds and low supply of good, old, inexpensive essential medicines. In the area of oncology, the community is grappling with both problems. Discussions are heavily focused on the high cost of medicines and the sustainability of health-care systems. A balance between the two is essential to ensure equal access to optimal cancer care, which is also at the heart of the mission of the European Society for Medical Oncology (ESMO). However, with the deliberations being focused on the high cost of medicines, the importance and shortage of the old, inexpensive essential medicines, without which new cancer treatments would be incomplete, tends to be overlooked.

Inexpensive essential medicine shortages are becoming increasingly prevalent and affect countries that are at all stages of development. About 80% of these medicines are a part of WHO’s Essential Medicines List and their shortages affect all classes of medicines, including complex chemotherapy drugs and anaesthetics as well as diabetes, hypertension, and asthma medications.¹ In oncology, shortages of generic, off-patent medicines are more pronounced because most of the medicines cannot be substituted—ie, if they are not available, the patient’s treatment is halted until the medicine becomes available.

Given the direct effect on cancer care and in view of findings of a survey² on antineoplastic medicines highlighting the disparities across countries on the availability of new and old cancer medicines, ESMO decided to focus on both issues separately. The root causes of the unavailability of expensive medicines are starkly different from those of the inexpensive, essential medicines, of which there is little awareness.

Recognising this hidden problem and its impact, ESMO decided to work with the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) to examine the reasons behind these shortages and how they can be prevented. In 2017, ESMO and the EIU published a comprehensive analysis of the situation in Europe, highlighting the underlying economic and societal factors driving these shortages and making tangible recommendations to overcome them.³ The launch of the report in May, 2017, coincided with the first meeting at the European Parliament, to increase awareness of this issue.

With data being key to convince European policy makers of this challenge, ESMO focused its efforts on understanding the state of play in select EU countries. This led to the creation of five country profiles, including western European countries (Germany and Belgium), eastern European countries (Romania and Bulgaria) and a Nordic country (Finland).⁴ The findings from these profiles led to two conclusions: all European countries are affected, and there is insufficient data to support the causes of these shortages.

Recognising that this is an EU issue that needs to be solved at the supranational level, ESMO decided to launch a Call to Action⁴ in view of the 2019 European Parliament elections, as well as the new European Commission, to ensure that the EU institutions acknowledge that this is a problem that affects the entire community—no disease nor country is immune to these shortages. The Call to Action, endorsed by 20 Members of the European Parliament and 12 organisations and patient groups, focuses on six key recommendations³ (panel).

To encourage EU and global bodies to implement these recommendations, two of ESMO’s tangible, short-term requests are development of an EU-wide study on this issue and creation of a common definition on medicines shortages. Numerous policy makers, member state representatives, and affected stakeholders who were a part of the launch meeting on April 9, 2019, unanimously agreed that this topic needs to be a priority of the upcoming EU legislature for 2019–24.

The inexpensive, essential cancer medicines are good, off-patent, and very effective, and their availability should be a given. Although expensive medicines are

Panel: Recommendations

- Introduce legislation for early notification requirements for medicines shortages
- Establish European strategic plans for medicines shortages
- Introduce incentives for production infrastructure improvements, including financial incentives to address the economic causes of manufacturing issues; incentives for suppliers to remain in these markets should also be considered
- All countries to develop catalogues or databases of shortages based on a common minimum set of data requirements, including a common EU definition of medicines shortages
- Develop national essential medicines lists based on the WHO’s Essential Medicines List
- Establish procurement models designed to prevent medicines shortages, including tender-cycle harmonisation

clearly a challenge, what is the excuse for not addressing shortages of inexpensive, essential medicines?

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- 1 WHO. Medicines shortages. Global approaches to addressing shortages of essential medicines in health systems. *WHO Drug Inf* 2016; **30**: 180–85.
- 2 Cherny N, Sullivan R, Torode J, Saar M, Eniu A. ESMO European Consortium Study on the availability, out-of-pocket costs and accessibility of antineoplastic medicines in Europe. *Ann Oncol* 2016; **27**: 1423–43.
- 3 Economist Intelligence Unit, European Society for Medical Oncology. Cancer medicines shortages in Europe. Policy recommendations to prevent and manage shortages. 2017. <http://www.eiu.com/graphics/marketing/pdf/ESMO-Cancer-medicines-shortages.pdf> (accessed April 15, 2019).
- 4 European Society for Medical Oncology. Inexpensive, essential cancer medicines shortages. <https://www.esmo.org/Policy/Inexpensive-Essential-Cancer-Medicines-Shortages> (accessed April 15, 2019).