Spending on cessation therapies decreasing but 1 in 5 still smoke

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Here we summarise the key points from the Health and Social Care Information Centre’s report on smoking in England during 2014.

The proportion of over-16s in England who smoke remains stubbornly high at around one in five in 2013, according to the latest official statistics. It’s an improvement compared with 2003, when the overall figure was over one in four but the picture is worse in young adults, with 25 per cent of 25–34 year-olds saying they are smokers. There has been more success reducing smoking by pregnant women, with 12 per cent smoking in 2014 compared with 12.7 per cent the previous year and 15.1 per cent in 2006/07.

The government’s targets, set out in 2011 in Healthy Lives, Healthy People: A Tobacco Control Plan for England, are to reduce smoking to ≤18.5 per cent among adults, to ≤12 per cent among 15 year-olds, and to ≤11 per cent in pregnant women by the end of 2015.

More encouragingly, hospital admissions attributable to smoking are down over the same period (from 6 to 4 per cent), as are deaths due to smoking (17 from 19 per cent). Far fewer 11–15 year-olds say they have tried smoking (22 vs 42 per cent). E-cigarettes are becoming more popular; they are now used by 3 per cent of adults and 18 per cent of smokers, about one-third to one-half of whom say they use them to stop or reduce cigarette consumption.

The activity of NHS Stop Smoking Services seems to be waning. In 2013/14, almost 600,000 people set a quit date, a fall of 19 per cent on the previous year and the second year of decline in succession. Successful quit rates remain at about 50 per cent, with around 90 per cent of people who stop smoking saying they now use medication. The cost of NHS Stop Smoking Services, excluding medication, was £235 per quitter in 2012/13 compared with £220 in the preceding two years.

Prescribing of the three treatments to help people stop smoking – nicotine replacement therapy (NRT), varenicline (Champix) and bupropion (Zyban) – is falling (see Figure 1), with 1.8 million items dispensed in 2013/14 compared with a peak of 2.6 million in 2010/11. Access to over-the-counter (OTC) NRT may be one factor behind this trend; prescribing of NRT has fallen by half compared with a third for varenicline. The OTC market for smoking cessation products was worth £135.5 million in 2013, an increase of 4.2 per cent over 2012 and of 32 per cent over 2009.

NHS spending on smoking cessation therapies continues to decrease, down 16 per cent in 2013/14 compared with 2012/13 (£48.8 million vs £58.1 million). The figure in 2011/12 was £65.9 million. Average net ingredient cost per item has changed little over the years for NRT (now approximately £23) or varenicline (£34) whereas the little-used bupropion is now cheaper than in 2009/10 (£39 vs £44).

References

Declaration of interests
None to declare.

Steve Chaplin is a pharmacist who specialises in writing on therapeutics