

Monetary Woes, Healthcare Blues:

The Consequences of Inflation & its Effect
on the Cost of Critical Medicines

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Country Director: Gabriel Okeowo

Research Analyst: Oluwatosin Iseniyi

Creative Development: Precious Chima Okorie

Editor: Esther Okoloeze, Vahyala Kwaga, Iniobong Usen

Contact: info@budgit.org +234-803-727-6668, +234-908- 333-1633

Address: 55, Moleye Street, Sabo, Yaba, Lagos, Nigeria.

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Introduction



Drugs for high blood pressure, pain management, anaesthetics, insulin, and other life-saving medications are experiencing price hikes, making them less accessible to many individuals.

Inflation, the general increase in prices and the fall in the purchasing value of money, has wide-ranging impacts across various sectors. One critical area significantly affected is healthcare, particularly the cost of essential medications. Drugs for high blood pressure, pain management, anaesthetics, insulin, and other life-saving medications are experiencing price hikes, making them less accessible to many individuals. As of November 2023, 1 in every 3 U.S. adults is unable to afford to take their medication as prescribed; high and rising drug prices are having devastating impacts on Americans' health and wallets.¹

For far too long, pharmaceutical companies have been free to set prices as high as the market will bear and raise these prices year after year in Nigeria. In fact, according to the Pharma Legal Handbook, there is currently no fixed mechanism in place for drug price control or reimbursement in Nigeria.² This shows weak economic policies on essential goods and commodities, leaving room for disastrous outcomes for the country's health sector.

¹ Rapfogel, N. (2023, November 1). Drug Companies Continue To Hike Prices Above Inflation. CAP. Retrieved November 13, 2024, from <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/drug-companies-continue-to-hike-prices-above-inflation/>

² Pharma Boardroom (n.d.). The Pharma Legal Handbook, PHL Nigeria. Retrieved November 13, 2024, from https://pharmaboardroom.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/PLH_NIGERIA_Final-new-design-pdf.io_.pdf

The Rising Costs of Essential Drugs

Pain management medications, another critical area, have also seen substantial price increases.



Paracetamol, a widely-used analgesic and antipyretic, has jumped from N200 to N500 per pack, a staggering increase many Nigerians, especially those dealing with chronic pain, find unsustainable.

To understand the gravity of this issue, we conducted a survey comparing the prices of essential medications from 2023 to 2024, revealing dramatic price hikes. Amlodipine, a critical drug for high blood pressure, has doubled in price, soaring from N1,500 to N3,000 per pack. Such a steep price increase is unsustainable for many patients who require it daily, not as a luxury but as a lifesaving necessity. The price surges aren't limited to amlodipine; ACE inhibitors, beta-blockers, and diuretics—other essential drugs for cardiovascular health—are also becoming unaffordable for many Nigerians. The root causes are diverse: inflation drives up the costs of production, transportation, and distribution, leading manufacturers and retailers to pass these costs on to consumers. With no price control policies, pharmaceutical companies can increase prices unchecked, leaving patients to bear the brunt of these hikes.

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critical area, have also seen substantial price increases. Paracetamol, a widely-used analgesic and antipyretic, has jumped from N200 to N500 per pack, a staggering increase many Nigerians, especially those dealing with chronic pain, find unsustainable. The rising cost of even basic pain relievers like ibuprofen has implications beyond immediate discomfort. For those with chronic pain conditions, the inability to adhere to prescribed regimens can lead to unmanaged pain, limited mobility, and declining quality of life. This dilemma is compounded by the cost of stronger pain medications and prescription opioids, which are often reserved for severe cases but are now out of reach for many due to inflation.

Inflationary pressures extend to anaesthetics, like Lidocaine, used for surgical procedures. The cost of Lidocaine has more than doubled from N2,000 to N4,500, and this sharp rise in anaesthetic prices directly affects the overall cost of surgeries and medical procedures.



Many hospitals are forced to increase surgical fees to accommodate the higher drug costs, creating a situation where essential surgeries are delayed or abandoned due to financial constraints. These delays in care, especially for patients in critical conditions, often lead to worsening health outcomes, complications, and, in severe cases, preventable fatalities.

The impact of inflation is especially severe for diabetic patients who rely on insulin to manage blood glucose levels. In Nigeria, insulin prices have surged by 100%, now costing N12,000. For diabetic patients, insulin isn't a choice—it is a necessity for survival. Yet, the rising price of insulin has led many to ration their doses or skip them altogether, risking life-threatening complications like ketoacidosis, organ

failure, and, in extreme cases, death. This insulin crisis is not unique to Nigeria; globally, inflation has driven insulin prices to record highs, raising ethical concerns about the accessibility of essential medications and highlighting the critical need for price controls.

These rising prices across the board paint a dire picture for the future of healthcare access in Nigeria. More Nigerians cannot afford essential medications without urgent interventions to stabilise prices and control inflationary pressures. The consequences will be severe: unchecked health conditions, increased healthcare costs as diseases become more complicated to manage, and a potential surge in mortality rates for preventable conditions.

Consequences for Those Unable to Afford Medications



Conditions like high blood pressure, if left untreated, dramatically increase the risk of strokes, heart attacks, and kidney failure—events that could have been prevented with affordable medication.

When individuals cannot afford essential medications, the consequences extend beyond immediate health risks, often leading to a cascade of serious, long-term complications. Conditions like high blood pressure, if left untreated, dramatically increase the risk of strokes, heart attacks, and kidney failure—events that could have been prevented with affordable medication. Similarly, for diabetic patients, uncontrolled blood glucose levels lead to neuropathy, retinopathy, and cardiovascular diseases, diminishing their quality of life and, in many cases, reducing life expectancy. The inability to access effective pain management further compounds suffering, as untreated pain can evolve into chronic

pain syndromes that deeply impair mobility and daily functioning.

Ironically, the inability to afford medications increases healthcare costs over time. Patients who cannot manage their conditions are more likely to require frequent hospitalisations, emergency room visits, and extended healthcare interventions to manage complications. This creates a significant financial strain on individuals, healthcare systems, and insurance providers, ultimately driving up healthcare costs for everyone. Preventable complications that emerge from unaddressed chronic conditions result in a vicious cycle of escalating medical expenses, further burdening healthcare facilities and reducing resources available for other patients.



Beyond the physical toll, the inability to afford essential medications imposes severe psychological strain. Constantly worrying about one's health without the means to address it often leads to anxiety, depression, and a profound sense of helplessness. The emotional toll of battling chronic conditions without sufficient resources can diminish overall well-being as patients face an unrelenting cycle of physical and mental challenges. This psychological burden can exacerbate existing health issues, creating a complex interplay of physical and mental health problems that further complicate recovery and positive health

behaviors.

The rise in medication costs, driven by inflation, disproportionately impacts low-income individuals and families, worsening existing socioeconomic inequities. For families struggling to make ends meet, the added burden of costly medications can lead to difficult trade-offs between health and other basic needs, such as food, education, and housing. This financial strain often locks families into a cycle of poverty and poor health, where the inability to work due to unmanaged health conditions further limits income, making medications even more unattainable.

Impact on Different Stakeholders and Barriers to Positive Health Behaviors



Financial constraints discourage adherence to positive health behaviours for these patients, as affordability becomes a barrier to maintaining consistent medication regimens and necessary lifestyle adjustments.

The immediate burden of these rising costs falls on patients who rely on these medications to manage chronic health issues. For example, individuals with hypertension who depend on Amlodipine now face double the previous cost, while diabetic patients struggle with insulin prices that have doubled as well. Financial constraints discourage adherence to positive health behaviours for these patients, as affordability becomes a barrier to maintaining consistent medication regimens and necessary lifestyle adjustments.

Pharmacy owners are also grappling with the repercussions of inflation-driven price hikes. Mrs Chidinma, a pharmacy owner in Obanikoro-Lagos, shared, “We've had to deal with many customers who leave without buying

because they simply cannot afford the prices. It's heartbreaking.” This trend impacts her business and reduces patient access to essential medications, as fewer people can prioritise their health when costs are prohibitively high.

Parents of children with chronic illnesses face profound struggles as they try to balance medication costs with other family needs. Mr Adewale, a father whose daughter has diabetes, expressed his frustration: “We have had to cut down on other essential needs to afford her insulin. It's a constant struggle.” Families in similar situations are forced to make sacrifices, which may affect all household members' overall well-being and developmental needs, not just the patient.



Elderly individuals on fixed incomes, particularly vulnerable to inflation, often have no option but to reduce their medication intake. Mrs Johnson, a 70-year-old hypertensive patient, explained, “I’ve had to halve my dosage to make my medication last longer. I don’t know what will happen next.” Halving doses can render treatments ineffective and, in some cases, lead to worsening symptoms, requiring emergency care and further

jeopardising the patient’s health. The escalating costs of essential medications are more than just a price issue—they present complex health, financial, and societal challenges. The inability to afford medications not only leads to poorer health outcomes and higher healthcare costs but also pushes vulnerable individuals toward a lower quality of life, depriving them of the means and hope to achieve optimal health outcomes.



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Governments can play a crucial role in mitigating the impact of inflation on drug prices. Policies such as price controls, subsidies, and importing cheaper generic drugs can help manage medication costs. Expanding healthcare coverage to include essential medications and ensuring adequate funding for public health programs are also critical measures. Lawmakers must take action to reign in drug price increases that compound Nigerians' challenges in affording and accessing the medications they need.

The pharmaceutical industry can contribute by implementing pricing strategies that consider inflation without excessively burdening consumers. Developing and promoting generic versions of essential medications can provide more affordable options. Transparency in pricing and reducing the middlemen in the supply chain can also help lower costs.

Community Support and Charitable

Organizations Community support and charitable organisations can assist those struggling to afford their medications. Programs that offer free or subsidised medications and initiatives that educate patients on managing their health conditions cost-effectively are vital. Collaborations between healthcare providers, non-profits, and government agencies can create comprehensive support networks for affected individuals.

Inflation significantly impacts the cost of essential drugs, posing severe challenges for individuals who cannot afford these increased prices. The consequences are severe, ranging from deteriorating health conditions to increased healthcare costs and mental health impacts. Addressing this issue requires a multifaceted approach involving government intervention, pharmaceutical industry initiatives, and community support. Ensuring essential medications remain affordable is crucial for maintaining public health and equity in healthcare access.

Strengthening Community
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