

Media release

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Gordon Brown receives prescription promise ‘wake-up call’

People across England will be joining forces to demonstrate their outrage at Gordon Brown's failure to act on his promise to abolish prescription charges for people with long-term conditions, by taking part in a simultaneous ‘wake-up phone call’ to No 10.

The wake-up call will take place at 11am on Monday 1 February 2010, representing the eleventh hour of the campaign, with large numbers of people with long-term conditions, their carers, families and health care professionals expected to call the Downing Street phone lines.

Due to the urgency of the situation, the coalition is encouraging people to take this unusual campaigning approach. If legislation is not implemented during the next few weeks, free prescriptions will not become a reality before the General Election.

In fact, if Mr Brown does not abolish prescription charges for people with long-term conditions before the election, the whole policy is at risk of failure as Labour are behind in the opinion polls and no other party has indicated any intention to change current legislation.

Gordon Brown promised to deliver free prescriptions for people with long-term conditions at the Labour party conference in September 2008, but, sixteen months later, his promise has still not been kept. This situation seems particularly unfair considering that prescriptions are already free in Wales and will soon be abolished in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

We know that people with long-term conditions across the country are finding it an increasing struggle to afford their medicines, including those with arthritis, asthma, Parkinson's, heart disease, colitis and Crohn's disease, Multiple Sclerosis, depression and stroke survivors.

For example, research by Asthma UK last summer highlighted that a third of people with asthma were finding it harder to pay for their prescriptions since the start of the recession and, in 2007, the Citizens Advice Bureau revealed that every year, around 800,000 people don't collect their prescriptions because of the cost.

If people can't afford the medicines they need to stay well, this can have a massive impact on their quality of life, ability to work, put increased pressure on relationships and families, and potentially lead to more serious illness.

Speaking on behalf of the Prescription Charges Coalition, Neil Churchill, Chief Executive of Asthma UK, said: ‘People with long term conditions will not accept this policy falling through the cracks. Gordon Brown must listen to today's wake-up call and deliver on his prescription promise without delay. In the mean time, people across the country are being forced into a position where they stretch their medicines or stop taking them altogether because of the cost, which can lead to worsening health and even result in hospital admissions. This is an unacceptable

state of affairs, so the message is, Gordon, time is running out - act now before it's too late.'

Ends

Some comments from people with long-term conditions affected by prescription charges:

Asthma

'Last year, I nearly died after a severe asthma attack and I'm worried it will happen all over again as I just can't afford to renew my Pre-Payment Certificate at the moment. It's outrageous that Gordon Brown promised to implement free prescriptions over a year ago and nothing has happened since'. Eddie

'I have to put my family first before I can afford my 3 lots of medication a month. I have 3 young children to feed.' Claire

Parkinson's

'My drugs are my lifeline. Without them I would have no movement at all - I would be sitting in my house, looking out the window - unable to dress, wash, cook. So I ask myself: "why should I have to pay?"' Anon

Colitis & Crohn's Disease

"The cost of the Prescription charge at £7.20 per drug is expensive. Treatment for Crohn's and Colitis often requires taking several medicines over long periods so the costs really mount up and become a significant extra burden on families whose income from work may already be reduced because of their illness. We need free prescriptions as the current situation may be adding a financial barrier to patients taking all the medicines they need for their treatments to be effective." Lucy

Multiple Sclerosis

Anon quote from a carer of a man with MS: *'In the past six months the rise in fuel costs and Council Tax has exacerbated our difficulties to the extent that my husband is now refusing to take most of his previous medication and is gradually reducing the tablets he needs the most, in the hope that he can eventually manage with only the minimum dosage necessary to keep the worst of his symptoms at bay. The effect of this is his fatigue is much worse, his relapses are more frequent, he can do less and less, he is becoming more depressed and I, as his only Carer, am under the associated strain that his deteriorating health causes. This is affecting my health and my capacity to continue working full time'.*

Mental health

Although Shaun is on Incapacity Benefit, he is not eligible for free prescriptions. As a result, he has often been unable to afford the medication that he needs. He says:

'It seems a false economy to deny people free prescriptions whilst at their poorest and sickest...If people are in a situation, and I've been there many times, when you're having to make a choice between essentials like food and heating and utility bills and medication, often it's the medication that doesn't get taken. And, frankly, both your physical and mental health suffer if you're denied any of these, whether you're sitting in a cold flat or not eating enough or not taking the medication your doctor feels would help you. And this is particularly bad at the moment. I know in my case, my food bill has doubled, my utility bills have gone up by a third, and my income has only gone up by something like £1.50 a week.'

Rheumatoid Arthritis

'Rheumatoid arthritis is for life. A chronic disease with no cure. The quality of my life is dependent on a cocktail of 10 different drugs. With them, I can almost live a normal life, without them, I would be a burden on society needing constant long term care, at a huge cost to the state. Dear Gordon, keep your promise and give a life back to all RA sufferers, regardless of their ability to pay, by allowing all to have the medication they need.' Anne

'To charge people suffering with long term disabilities for their medications, when I am sure that many of them already contribute to the system (as I do), is completely unfair and will only serve to make a large percentage of the population feel alienated, let down and demoralised. As a sufferer, you have enough obstacles to face on a daily basis without the Government putting yet another one in the way!' Nina

Notes to Editors

1. For further information about the Prescription Promise campaign, or to set up interviews with Coalition spokespeople / case studies, please contact Fen Bagias in the Asthma UK media office on 020 7786 4949
2. There are 22 members of the Prescription Charges Coalition, including:

- Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome Support Group - www.aissg.org
- Arthritis Care - www.arthritiscare.org.uk
- Association for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus - www.asbah.org
- Asthma UK - www.asthma.org.uk
- Behcets Syndrome Society - www.behcets.org.uk
- British Heart Foundation - www.bhf.org.uk
- Diabetes UK - www.diabetes.org.uk
- Disability Alliance - www.disabilityalliance.org
- FibroAction - www.fibroaction.org
- Klinefelter's Syndrome Association - www.ksa-uk.co.uk
- Mind - www.mind.org.uk
- Motor Neurone Disease Association - www.mndassociation.org
- MS Society - www.mssociety.org.uk
- National Ankylosing Spondylitis Society - www.nass.co.uk
- National Association for Colitis and Crohn's Disease - www.nacc.org.uk
- National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society - www.rheumatoid.org.uk
- Parkinson's Disease Society - www.parkinsons.org.uk
- Pernicious Anaemia Society - www.pernicious-anaemia-society.org
- Rethink - www.rethink.org
- The Stroke Association - www.stroke.org.uk
- Skin Care Campaign - www.skincarecampaign.org
- Terrence Higgins Trust - www.tht.org.uk