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Learning from the Red Line program in India on the labelling of antibiotics: a qualitative interview study exploring experiences of the general public, pharmacists, and policy-makers

05. New antibacterial agents, PK/PD & Stewardship

5d. Antimicrobial stewardship and improved prescribing (incl interventions, decision-support / prediction tools, behavioural aspects)

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Background Previous research in LMICs shows that communities are often not able to distinguish antibiotics from other commonly sold medicines. The Red Line campaign, launched in India in 2016, introduced a 'red line' on the packaging of prescription only medicines (POMs) including antibiotics. The campaign had three objectives: (i) improve the identification of POMs; (ii) curb self-medication; and (iii) increase awareness on antibiotics. The aim of this study was to explore experiences from the general public, pharmacists and policy-makers with Red Line to understand the awareness about the campaign, how the campaign was perceived and implemented.

Methods An exploratory qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews. Fifteen interviews were conducted with participants from different states across India: 5 general public members (Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Rajasthan), 5 pharmacists (Tamil Nadu) and 5 policy-makers (Kerala). Online interviews were conducted, audio recorded and transcribed. A thematic data analysis was applied.

Results The interview data suggest an overall low awareness on the meaning of the red line on medicine packages among the general public, pharmacists and healthcare workers. While some participants believed that a 'red warning' would catch people's attention, others worried that the red line could be overlooked as medicine packages are typically full of information. Other factors that hinder the visibility of the red line on the packaging included variations in medicine dispensing practices (e.g., only blister pack and no medicine box) as well as patient's medicine

storage habits (e.g., removal from original packaging). Suggestions for future implementation efforts were: involvement and training of pharmacists and prescribers, and regulation reinforcements. The data also suggest a lack of awareness and confusion about what POMs and antibiotics are, and on how to identify them. Finally, ideas were shared by participants on how to improve their identification (Table 1).

Conclusions Most of our participants were not aware of the meaning of the Red Line labelling on the POM packaging. Also, the Red Line labelling can be overlooked which limits its purpose. These lessons are valuable to improve and guide future interventions on the labelling of antibiotics to improve their identification, dispensing and use.

Table 1

Table 1: Quotes on suggestions to improve the identification of POMs and antibiotics

Like we add Rx to, we may add Abx, if it is an antibiotic. That will create awareness saying that this particular term meaning that it is an antibiotic, that will be much more easier for a pharmacist also to identify... before dispensing. And all healthcare professionals, it will be helpful... (Pharmacist)

Colour coding and the shape of the medicine can definitely become a language for communicating that this is an antibiotic or this is a serious medicine or a light medicine. So, I am sure the shape and the colour of the medicine itself can help (General Public)

If we could just mention that it is an antibiotic on the label, then it is the easiest no? (Pharmacist)

So, we insist that antibiotic prescriptions should be inside a bracket. So, that they [=prescribers] will know that they are handling something that needs to be administered properly. That distinction has to be made. (Policy-maker)

Keyword 1

Responsible antibiotic use

Keyword 2

Medicine labelling

Keyword 3

Antibiotic stewardship

Conflicts of interest

Do you have any conflicts of interest to declare?

I have no potential conflict of interest to report