

*Original Research Article*

# Physicians' attitudes and beliefs about the use of over-the-counter medicines. A Survey

Antoaneta Tsvetkova<sup>1\*</sup>, Anna Todorova<sup>2</sup> and Valentina Petkova<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

<sup>1</sup>TRS "Assistant Pharmacist", Medical College -Varna

<sup>2</sup>Department of Pharmaceutical Science and Pharmaceutical Management, Faculty of Pharmacy, Medical University of Varna

<sup>3</sup>Faculty of Pharmacy, Medical University –Sofia

\*Corresponding Author's Email: [antoaneta\\_cvetkova@abv.bg](mailto:antoaneta_cvetkova@abv.bg)

**Bulgaria is one of the countries in the EU where health promotion and disease prevention activities are most underestimated. Bulgarians are not active enough in maintaining their health and wellbeing as a result of financial constraints, heavy bureaucracy and poor information. Patients distrust physicians and Bulgarian health system. Therefore, one in ten Bulgarians regularly seeks self-medication. The purpose of this survey is to examine physicians' attitudes and beliefs about patients' motivation to seek self-medication with OTC drugs, as well as physicians' assessment of related benefits and risks. The respondents of this questionnaire survey are GPs and medical specialists working in the town of Varna. The results show that an increasing number of patients seek self-medication motivated by the possibility to control their expenses through the convenient and time-saving purchase of OTC drugs. Self-medication hinders physicians from providing professional health care, and it mainly poses a risk to patients' health. Therefore, widespread adoption of collaborative health care services is imperative.**

**Keywords:** OTC, prevention, risks, safety, self-medication

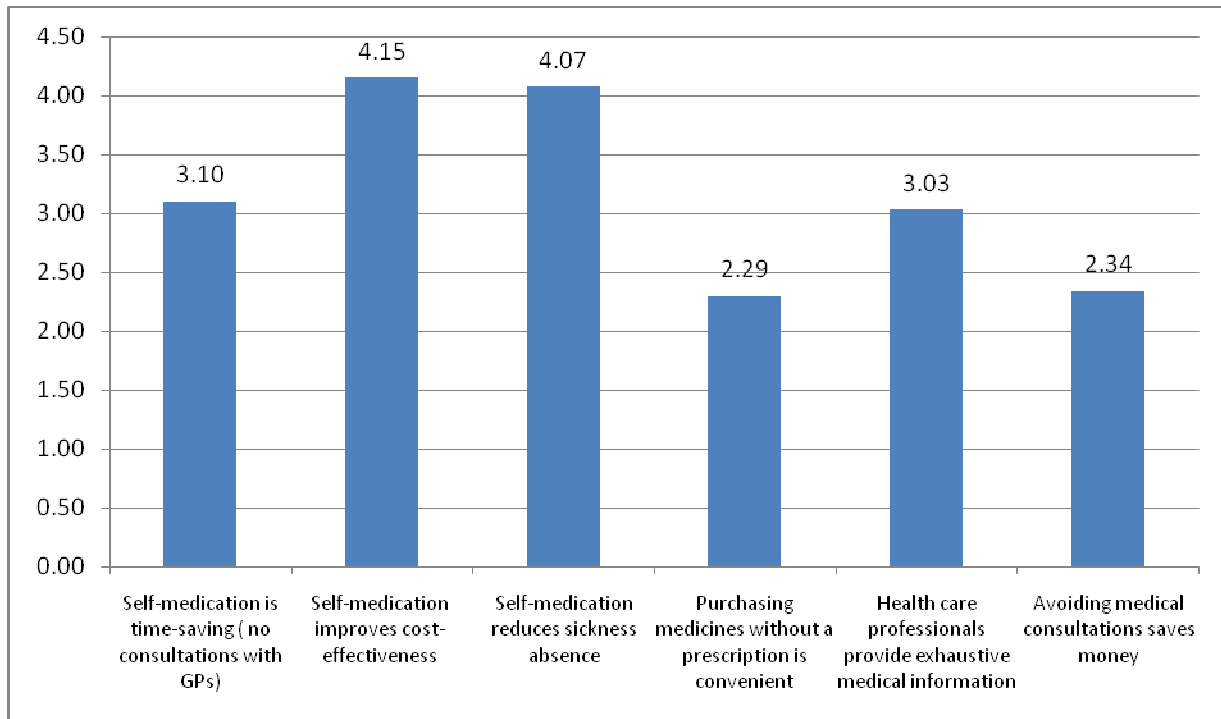
## INTRODUCTION

Bulgarian health system has been going through an ever deepening crisis over the last 15 years. This is evidenced not only by the discontent of patients and medical professionals, but also by the deterioration of public health status. The limited access to emergency medical services and the emigration of medical professionals, together with the loss of trust and confidence in doctor-patient relationship are considered to be the major issues in the health system. Furthermore, the health system suffers from a shortage of qualified specialists, insufficient funds for renovation and equipment of health facilities, inefficient emergency medical care and numerous bankruptcies of hospitals. Bulgarian society distrusts doctors and believes that health care system has devolved into a profiteering enterprise. Regional hospitals often fail to meet contemporary health care requirements. Therefore, patients seek treatment in private clinics, which results in further financial destabilization of hospitals. Another worrying tendency shows that low income in Bulgaria forces a growing

number of people to seek self-medication. As a result of patients' low health literacy, nearly 19% of them have never undergone a prophylactic medical examination. Last but not least, physicians point out the problems related to the provision of medical equipment, the recruitment of medical staff and the regulatory failures. (6)According to a survey conducted by the CHPA (Consumer Healthcare Products Association), 88% of the physicians have advised their patients to treat common ailments first with OTC drugs, and to consult a medical specialist only in case self-medication shows no therapeutic result (Stone, 2013).

## Objectives

The purpose of this survey is to examine and analyze the attitudes and beliefs of physicians in the town of Varna about the increasingly easy access to OTC drugs and the related potential risks and benefits of self-medication.



**Figure 1.** Dominant motives for the purchase of OTC drugs

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A direct anonymous questionnaire was the research instrument of this survey. The simple random sample of respondents comprised GPs and medical specialists with practices located in DCCs (Diagnostic-consultative centers), Multiprofile Hospitals for Active Treatment (MHAT) and University MHAT in the town of Varna. Respondents were interviewed in their professional environment. The questionnaire consisted of open, closed and scaled questions. The survey excluded questions concerning the use of prescription medicines, nutritional supplements and homeopathic remedies.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The survey was conducted between February 2013 and September 2013. 68 respondents participated in this survey - 40 GPs (58, 82%) and 28 medical specialists (41, 18%). Respondents' average work experience was 15, 04 years, and their average age was 44, 8 years.

According to 48, 53% of respondents, one half of their patients use OTC drugs. Medical professionals share their observations that an increasing number of patients are seeking self-medication. Data from IMS Bulgaria shows that the market share of nonprescription medicines in Bulgaria accounts for 26-28% of the total pharmaceutical market. The consumption of these products is expected to rise by 5-7% annually (IMS

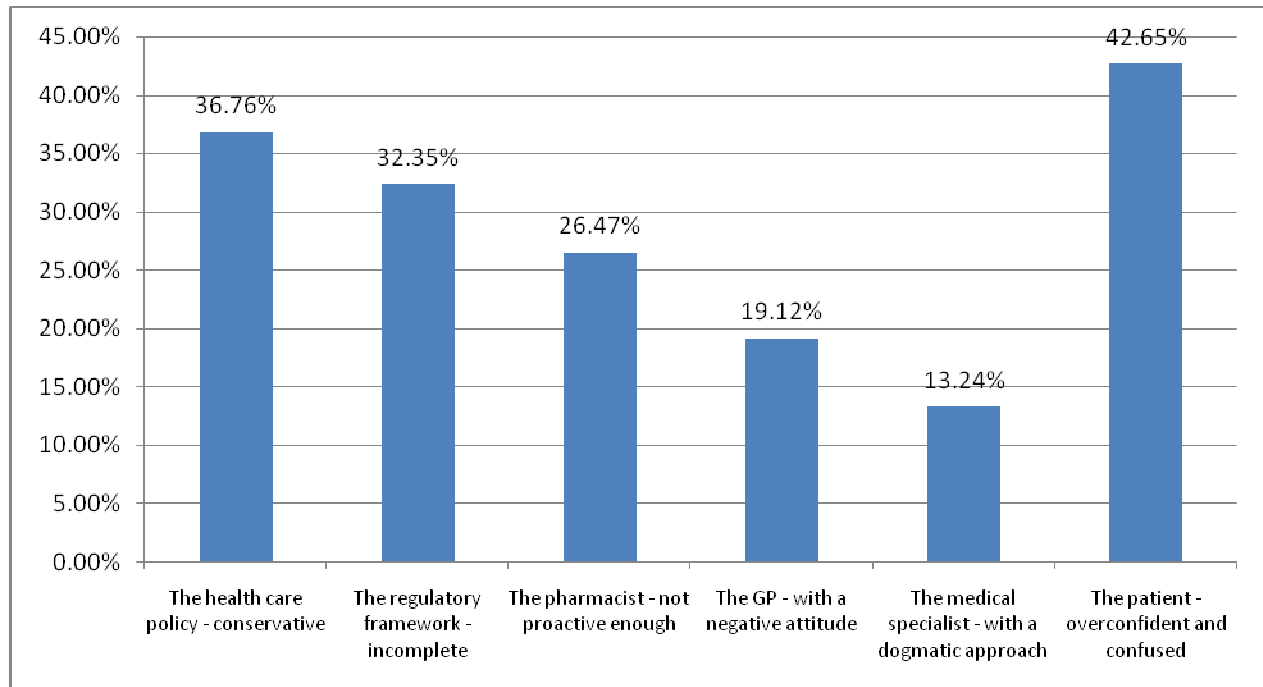
Health Bulgaria).

Both chronic and acute diseases are treated with OTC drugs - 44, 12% of respondents acknowledge this pattern. OTC drugs are used either as a concurrent therapy for chronic diseases, or for treatment of acute medical conditions. OTC medications are manufactured, distributed and sold to be used by patients on their own initiative and responsibility, i.e. no visit to the doctor is required (Ordinance № 3 of 4, 2008). (Figure 1)

Respondents consider cost-effectiveness of self-medication to be the most important factor – it is rated with 4.15 out of 5 maximum. The second dominant motive is the possibility of treating medical conditions without being absent from work – the average evaluation of its importance is 4.07. In terms of its importance, the time-saving effect of self-medication is rated third with an average score of 3.10. Respondents consider the convenience of buying OTC drugs without a prescription as the least important factor – it is rated with 2.29.

More than one-half of the surveyed physicians (51.47%) believe that patients face no obstacles in consulting GPs or specialists, 20.59% of respondents' state that the access to physicians is hindered. Another 11.76% of them believe that there are significant difficulties, while the rest of respondents (16.18%) express no definite opinion.

According to surveys conducted by various research teams, the limited access to emergency medical services and the emigration of medical professionals, together with the loss of trust in doctor-patient relationship are



**Figure 2.** Reasons for self-medication

considered by medical professionals to be the major issues of health care. A research conducted by the Open Society Institute examines the attitudes of 1188 Bulgarians aged 18 and over. Its results show that one in ten Bulgarians distrusts physicians and the existing health system, and therefore, seeks self-medication with OTC drugs. As a consequence of patients' distrust and their low health literacy, almost one-fifth of Bulgarian patients (18.6%) admit they have never undergone a prophylactic medical examination. Another 49.2% of patients confirm that they seek no medical advice by professionals, since they are confident in their choice of appropriate medications for the treatment of their conditions. Financial constraints prevent 13.4% of patients from consulting a medical professional. Another factor contributing to this worrying trend is that one-third of Bulgarian patients consider health care services to be of low quality. The most serious patient complaints are registered in the south-eastern and the north central regions of the country. The long distance to the nearest hospital or medical practice is a major barrier to the easy access to medical services in those regions. Some of the patients are not able to afford the travel expenses to the hospital, though they have already received a referral letter for further examinations or medical tests from their GPs (Tencheva, 2014).

Figure 2 below displays the main reasons for self-medication as indicated by interviewed physicians.

The majority of participants (42.6%) acknowledge that patients' propensity to self-medicate is influenced by overconfident or conflicted decisions about the purchase

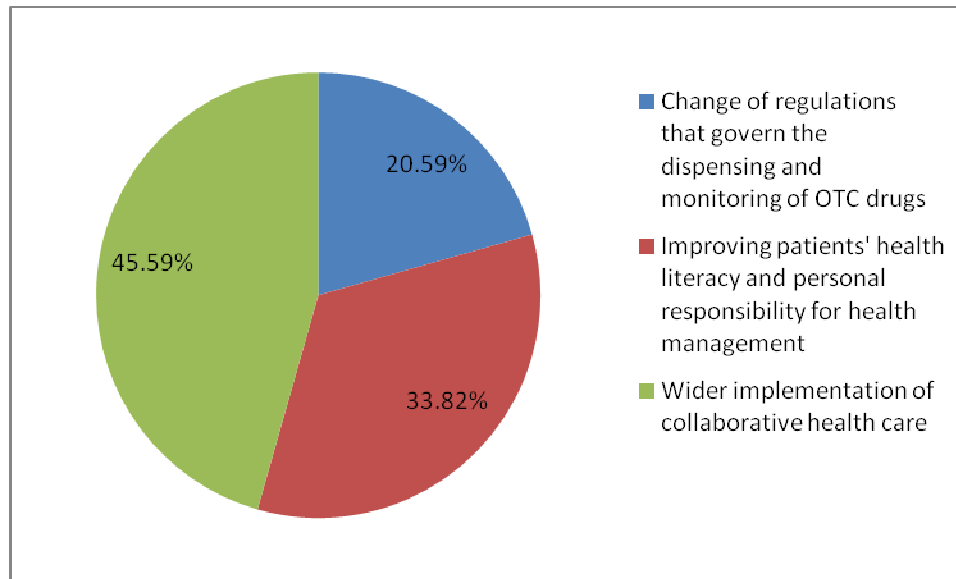
of OTC drug.

According to physicians, the second most important factor is the health care policy of regulatory agencies—36.76% of them thinks that the conservative government policy forces patients to avoid medical consultations and seek self-medication. More than one-third of the respondents (32.35%) believe that the increase of OTC drug use results from the regulatory framework, or rather its absence. As for patient counseling, one-fourth of the respondents emphasize that pharmacists are not active enough, which decisively affects patients' inclination to self-medicate. One-fifth of our respondents criticize GPs' skills and competence.

In the pharmacies in the EU, pharmacists are the basic source of information on OTC medicines and play crucial role in improving health education and promoting safe and effective self-care.<sup>9</sup>By providing pharmaceutical care and monitoring the use of OTC medicines, pharmacists contribute to effective and safe self-medication.

One-third of the surveyed physicians think that consumer choices are greatly influenced by drug advertisements. 17.65% of the respondents express the opposite opinion. More than one-half of our respondents (51.47%) have no opinion on the issue.

A high percentage of respondents (72.06%) believe that easy access to OTC drugs hinders their professional activities, the other 27.94% think it facilitates their work. The easy access to OTC medications often leads to indiscriminate use or to misuse of drugs, which could pose a serious risk to patients' health.



**Figure 3.** Necessary changes of health care policies

The majority of respondent (41.18%) agree that self-medication creates the most significant value for the health system by preventing and reducing sickness absence. One-third of them (33.82%) say that the greatest economic benefits of self-medication come through the reduced government spending on prescription drugs, which otherwise would be reimbursed by the National health insurance fund and the Ministry of Health. Only a small group of the interviewed physicians (7.35%) consider that fewer medical consultations allow government to cut health care cost and redirect its spending.

More than half of the respondents (61.76%) think that self-medication poses a risk to patients, 32.35% of them consider self-medication a source of medical complications, and only 5.88% of them see the beneficial effects of self-medication. Since there is no such notion as “harmless medicines”, patients should be adequately informed about the appropriate choices of drugs and their safe use, about all possible drug interactions and adverse drug reactions. Furthermore, if self-medication has no positive therapeutic outcome, patients should be referred for medical consultation with a physician.

Figure 3 below displays respondents' opinion on eventual adjustments of health care policies related to self-medication.

Wider implementation of collaborative health care is deemed necessary by the majority of respondents (45.59%). More than one-third of them (33.82%) acknowledge the need of better health literacy and higher personal responsibility for health management. The rest of our respondents (20.59%) want further adjustments of the regulations for dispensing of OTC drugs and self-medication surveillance.

Most of the participants in our survey (77.94%) confirm they have treated or advised a patient who has experienced a negative reaction to a non-prescription medicine, while the rest of them (22.06%) say they have never encountered such a problem. All of the interviewed physicians admit they have never use the website of the Bulgarian Drug Agency (BDA) to file a report on suspected ADRs.

The answers to the above two questions bring patient safety issues to the fore. For this reason, additional measures to improve post marketing surveillance of drug safety should be taken. Therefore, promoting pharmacovigilance (drug-related patient safety) activities at the national level is imperative (Getov et al., 2013).

According to WHO, patient safety is a serious public health issue in a number of countries. Unfortunately, both medical professionals and general public remain unaware of its importance.

All medical professionals should be fully aware that reporting of suspected ADRs is intrinsically linked to the care and safety of patients.

According to statistics over the past 11 years, the annual average number of reports of ADRs in Bulgaria is 135. On the other hand, there were 487 421 reports submitted to the database of suspected ADRs at the European Medicines Agency in just a single year (2009). The numbers show that Bulgarian medical professionals do not report on suspected ADRs, regardless of the simplified procedure. The yellow card scheme for electronic submission of ADR reports can be easily found on the web page of the BDA ([jivotatdnes.bg/index.php](http://jivotatdnes.bg/index.php), Drug Safety – a Priority in Bulgaria (Provide year).

By participating in post marketing surveillance, medical professionals can gather information on drug use

patterns and trends. The growing significance of this approach corresponds to the increasing variety of easily accessible OTC drugs.

Such systematic data would affect positively the promotion of responsible self-medication and would increase the social and economic benefits of self-medication (Getov et al., 2013).

Free of charge mandatory prophylactic examinations are the key factor for improving public health status in Bulgaria. Improved public health status would reduce the expenditures for hospital treatment, as well as the pressure on the social system. Additional benefits would be the higher job efficiency and added social value. The long-term outcomes would be a higher quality of life and a longer life expectancy.

Preventive health care has gained importance in modern health systems. However, Bulgarian health system is dramatically lagging in terms of health promotion and disease prevention.

The significance of health literacy and related educational activities in the country is underrated, and public funds are allocated towards disease treatment at the expense of active disease prevention. This vicious cycle only aggravates the existing problems. In addition, child and adolescent health policies are ineffective due to lack of communication and unpopular government measures ([www.novabulgaria.bg/the-road/profilaktika-i-prevenciya](http://www.novabulgaria.bg/the-road/profilaktika-i-prevenciya), Prophylaxis and Prevention - the Road to a New Bulgaria (2012).

Therefore, Bulgarian health system needs a new general concept and effective strategies for radical changes.

## CONCLUSION

The increasing use of OTC drugs is an uptrend that focuses the attention of pharmacists, physicians and

patients on the underlying causes. Bulgarians are not persistent in maintaining their health and wellbeing due to financial constraints and heavy bureaucracy in a poor information environment. Health education programs are imperative for the improvement of public health awareness. In addition, there is a need for a more detailed classification of ailments that are suitable for self-medication. Medical professionals should be encouraged to report on suspected ADRs which is an important mechanism for maintaining drug safety. These activities will reduce the expenditures for hospital treatment and the burden on the social system, increase the job efficiency and add social value. In the long run, they will affect positively the quality of life and the life expectancy.

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