Prescribing support software recommends more expensive prescriptions

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Your sharp-eyed editor has his eyes drawn to recommendations to prescribe a more expensive therapy. Prescribing support software is widely used and designed to improve prescribing by recommending more cost-effective prescriptions. Sometimes this is done by recommending generics and sometimes by suggesting alternative agents. A recent article in Prescriber describes its functionality in detail.¹

Nearly always the recommendation is for cheaper preparations. However, these screen shots show a more expensive recommendation (Figure 1)!

Figure 1 Recommendation for higher cost prescribing
The Editor would be delighted to hear if this is an isolated problem or one that other readers of the journal have seen. Also, can readers suggest reasons for this? These prompts appeared in late February 2008, though one of the notes within the guidance note relates to 2007. Whilst the recommended substitutions are either cheaper per gram of cream or per tablet because the quantities substituted are greater the prescription is more expensive. Further enquiries revealed that the people loading the ‘rules’ into the prescribing support software were not aware that their implication might be more expensive prescriptions. They also did not have sight of how the rules they were loading appeared in front of the clinicians using the prescribing support application. There are lessons from this:

1 Clinicians need to watch prescribing support software carefully. It is possible to create rules within it that recommends a ‘negative benefit’ i.e. a more expensive prescription.
2 Managers and clinicians loading guidance need to take account of different size containers and numbers of tablets recommended as this can change the final cost to the health service.
3 It may be undesirable for applications to be designed in a way that allows ‘negative benefits’ to be generated, or for those loading the rules not to have a ‘clinician view’.

REFERENCE