David Newnham has the last word – from the consumer point of view

Did you hear about the prescription charges? Terrible business. Apparently they doubled them overnight. Not for everybody, you understand, or it would have been in the papers, wouldn't it? No, it seems that selected people had their charges doubled. People like my friend.

Poor old Larry. He's not happy, I can tell you. One minute he was on £5.90, the next it was £11.80. He still can't understand why.

Larry used to live in Bigtown, and several years ago, his GP prescribed some tablets for a chronic complaint (he asked me not to mention what it was, so we'll just say that it wasn't life threatening). The tablets were to be taken at the rate of one a day for ever more. They came in packs of 56, and Larry's doctor wrote '56' on the prescription. A pack would last Larry eight weeks.

Then the poor chap moved to Smalltown, a pretty place in Beet County. And in Smalltown, Larry got himself another GP. Would the new doc continue the old prescription? Of course he would. No examination, he'd just print out a docket. Except that when Larry took his new prescription to Smalltown Chemists, he spotted the pharmacist breaking into the regular pack of tablets and counting half the contents into a smaller box.

'Excuse me,' said Larry. 'But why have you given me 28 tablets instead of 56?'

'Because that's what it says on the prescription,' said the pharmacist.

Larry assumed his new GP had made a mistake. So a week before the tablets were due to run out (which came around annoyingly quickly) he went to the surgery and asked the receptionist if she thought the doctor might allow him 56 tablets in future.

'I don't think so,' she said. 'The doctors have told us that all the quantities are being halved. It's health authority policy, under orders from the government.'

Now Larry's not one for confrontation, but he doesn't mind being assertive on the phone. So he rang the Department of Health and asked about this new policy of half rations. But the helpful lady at the ministry was nonplussed. 'It's up to individual GPs what quantities they prescribe,' she said.

The lady at Beet County Health Authority was equally helpful – and equally adamant that Larry's GP had absolute discretion on this matter. 'We try to discourage waste,' she said. 'But we have issued no new guidelines on how many tablets to prescribe.'

'I've told Larry that his next step should be to confront his new GP. But you know what some people are like.'

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