

Price Doesn't Lie (Or Does It?): A Journey from Risk Modeling to Reviewing What We Know

Many people, including patients, assume that cheap medicines are more likely to be of poor quality. We were curious whether that was true.

When we interviewed regulators, manufacturers, pharmacists and procurement officers in Indonesia, Kenya, China and Romania, price kept coming up. People told us that pressure to cut costs, especially in public procurement, pushed manufacturers to cut corners. Low price seemed a plausible warning sign, so we built it into our risk-based sampling models to find poor-quality medicines more efficiently.

We tested this assumption in Indonesia. In several studies, medicines were sampled across the price range, from the cheapest unbranded generics to brands costing many times more. Prices varied enormously, and many patients paid far more than they needed to. The results showed that quality did not follow price: the cheapest medicines were as likely to meet standards as the most expensive ones.

That left us with a question we couldn't answer from Indonesia alone. Was this a local pattern, or had the link between price and quality been overstated more widely? To find out, we began a systematic review. In this presentation, we share our initial analysis of 34 empirical studies and unpublished datasets. The picture that emerges is nuanced: patterns differ between regions and markets, and we explore why that might be.

We'd like to reflect on these findings together with you. What do they mean in practice for patients, procurers, regulators and others? And what have you seen in your own work?