

## **HISTORIC DAY FOR HEALTH SERVICE AS MCGIMPSEY ANNOUNCES END TO PRESCRIPTION CHARGING**

Health Minister, Michael McGimpsey has announced his intention to abolish prescriptions charges in Northern Ireland.

The cost of a prescription will be reduced to only £3 per prescription in January 2009 and then will be free of charge by April 2010. Prepayment certificates will also come down in price, from £35.85 to £9 for four months and from £98.70 to £25 for 12 months until prescriptions are free.

Making the announcement at the Cancer Centre in Belfast City Hospital, the Health Minister said: **“A cradle to grave health service, free at the point of delivery, is the founding principle of the NHS which was founded 60 years ago this year. It is a principle that I, and the entire population of Northern Ireland, wholeheartedly support.**

**“Yet for the majority of the last 60 years, people here have been forced to live with an inequitable and unjust system whereby one person’s suffering is ranked above another. It is simply unacceptable that those who are ill should have to worry about finding money for vital drugs which they cannot afford. This is totally against the ethos of a health service which promises free health and social care to all.**

**“The introduction of free prescriptions was one of my party’s manifesto commitments and was also one of my earliest Assembly debates. It has prompted countless letters and calls from patients seeking relief from the burden of paying for prescriptions for essential medication. That is why I established a cost and benefits review into the abolition of prescription charging last year.**

**“I have now considered the findings of the review and today am announcing my intention to introduce free prescriptions in Northern Ireland, subject to the agreement of the Executive.”**

The Minister said that in reaching his decision he had to carefully consider the consequences of any change to the current charging regime in Northern Ireland.

He continued: **“A key consideration for me was the loss of around £13million income each year from prescription charges, and while it is only 3.5% of the total drugs bill, it is still a lot of money. It is used to fund vital health and social care services for everyone. I also had to take account of concerns over increased demand from the public who may be more likely to ask for medication if it is free of charge.**

**“After looking closely at the financial position with my officials, I have concluded that the cost of free prescriptions can be found within my existing budget and without impacting on any existing service.”**

To help ensure that the drugs bill does not rise unnecessarily, the Minister said he would be encouraging healthcare professionals to prescribe sensibly. He said: **“I will also need the support of everyone in Northern Ireland to make this work and act responsibly with regard to demanding prescriptions.**

**“This is an historic and happy day for the health and social care service in Northern Ireland. It brings to an end an inequitable system which caused only anxiety to thousands of people who were already suffering from serious illnesses.**

**“It is also a testament to what can be achieved by a local administration responding to local needs and wishes. The people of Northern Ireland deserve no less from their own Government.”**