Dispensing doctors are general practitioners (GPs) who provide primary healthcare to nearly nine million (8.7m) UK rural patients. Nearly 3.6 million of these patients live remotely from a community pharmacy; at the patient's request dispensing doctors are allowed to dispense the medicines they prescribe for these patients.

The unique benefits of the dispensing doctor service are that it provides access to medicines and general healthcare under one roof. This includes the operation of branch surgeries and near-patient tests for patients in rural areas.

When patients are eligible to choose to receive dispensing services from their GP, the overwhelming majority choose to do so. The 2008 DDA Patient Survey demonstrates patients’ preference for GP dispensing services. Since 2013 there have been a number of debates in Parliament regarding the need to offer choice of medicines supply to rural patients.

Sources: DDA website information. Patients prefer the convenience of pharmacies – Myth http://www.dispensingdoctor.org/dispensing-practice/dispensing-doctors-myths/

Who is eligible to receive GP dispensing services?

Only certain patients are eligible to receive dispensing services from a dispensing doctor; in England the majority of patients receiving the GP dispensing service will live in a controlled area and their registered residence will be located more than 1.6km from the nearest pharmacy.

The numbers:
Dispensing practice in England

- 1143 dispensing practices
- 4350 dispensing GPs
- 8.3m rural patients
- 3.27m patients eligible for the GP dispensing service
- 7% of all prescription items
- 8.2% cheaper than pharmacy on the cost of drugs

Sources:
- HSCIC data. NHS Payments to General Practice, England, 2013-14: Experimental Statistics
- HSCIC data January 2015: Numbers of Patients Registered at a GP Practice
- DDA website article. Dispensing GPs cheaper by £6+ per patient
Since March 2005, a practice can only apply to become a dispensing practice if it is located in a controlled locality outside a 1.6km radius of a pharmacy.

As a result of the maturity of the pharmacy network in England, there have been very few successful applications for new dispensing practices since 2005.