Generic versus Brand Name

A frequent question at our office is whether a generic drug can be used in order to reduce the cost of treatment. The answer is usually "yes", but there are certain times when it is a VERY bad idea.

Think of it this way: Do you want to use the same cell phone that you had 10-20 years ago? Chances are no one you know still utilizes their cell phone from that long ago. Why not? The answer is that TECHNOLOGY HAS IMPROVED. The old cell phone ("generics") may still allow you to make calls, but the newer ones ("brand name") let you make calls as well as access the internet, get a GPS location, and have a camera--probably with better reception too ("fewer side effects").

Newer ***is*** better in many situations. Most of the time it's the uneducated who loudly criticizes branded drugs but also has the latest and greatest cell phone (and every other modern electronic gadget). It's amazing where people choose to be cheap.

It is sometimes argued that generic drugs are the exact same active ingredient that's in the original branded medication, so what's the big deal? The "big deal" is that while the active ingredient may be the same, it is federal law that it can *vary in amount* by around TWENTY PERCENT (20%)!!! This point is extremely important. Stated another way, the generic pill may have only 80% of what the brand name pill contains, or it may be 120%, or anywhere in between, and differs from pill to pill or month to month--with no way of knowing. This level of quantity variability (error) is a sort of reward that the government regulators (FDA) give to generic drug makers to encourage the production of cheaper meds. [The government cares because they are a HUGE buyer of drugs, and they want to save money in this area (so that they can then go waste it in others).] This concept of imprecise content matters more in some medications than others.

Here are a few examples of when a branded drug is a vastly superior option:

1) Thyroid medication - The doses of Synthroid, Levoxyl, and similar drugs vary so little from one to the next that the error range discussed above can totally wipe out the adjustment we want to make. For example, if we want to increase the dose of Synthroid from 100mcg to 112mcg and the government allows a generic drug to be "off" by 20%, we might get a pill that has anywhere between 90mcg and 135mcg in it. It is pretty much impossible to keep a patient's thyroid level corrected when the dose can bounce around so much. We rely on very small adjustments of very exact amounts to properly care for thyroid disease. Generic drugs do not allow for this necessary level of precision. Thankfully, brand name Synthroid, for instance, costs no more than approximately $35 per month even if a patient has to pay for it *without* any insurance. Cost is rarely ever enough to make a difference for patients with thyroid drugs.

2) Birth control pills - For the same reasons as with thyroid agents, oral contraceptives are another class of meds in which a very small change in dose can make a big difference in desired effect (pregnant or NOT pregnant; no cramps vs. severe cramps; heavy vs. light menstruation; clear skin vs. significant acne). Generic versions of birth control pills do not have the same precise levels of hormones that their brand name counterparts do. For a lot of women, the tiny differences do not matter; but for some female patients it is a matter of being able to maintain a normal life.

3) Seizure/epilepsy prevention - With these neurologic meds, a very small variance in the content of each and every dose can make the difference between remaining free of seizures or suffering a severe episode that would then keep a patient from being able to drive a car for six months. A seizure could happen when someone is driving at high speed on a tall bridge and result in multiple injuries/deaths.

Pharmacies almost always want you to use generics because their profit margin is higher; many pharmacies will give bonuses to employees for getting patients to switch from brand name medications to generics. You are completely within your rights to refuse generic substitution, and the pharmacist should happily honor your request.