

HALEON

The role of pharmacists in self-care

Our Haleon position



Introduction

by Lars-Åke Söderlund, Vice President, the International Pharmaceutical Federation (FIP)

As the global healthcare system continues to evolve, with individuals feeling a greater desire to manage their everyday health, self-care is expected to have an increasing role. As such, we need a new approach to healthcare that empowers people to look after their health, freeing resources for patients with acute healthcare needs. Pharmacists are at the forefront of these changes.

Knowledge, prevention, and management of disease has also changed dramatically in recent decades. In addition to the responsibility of governments to provide universal health coverage, citizens also have a role to care for themselves - "self-care" – through treatment, illness prevention, engaging in health education, and application of healthy living principles. Although the "medical model" of care, characterised as handing over one's health to a professional to manage was, and is, an important concept and practice, a "social model" of care focused on policies, education and health promotion that directs efforts to the social, economic, and environmental determinants of health is essential for a future-proof and sustainable health system.

This model recognises both the personal responsibility of patients to enhance and maintain their own health and wellbeing, and the responsibility of pharmacists to support patients in self-care activities. Appropriate support by pharmacists will assist patients in improved or maintained health, greater health self-efficacy, and higher economic efficiency. The accessibility of community pharmacists coupled with their professional health expertise make them and their services a critically important component of self-care. The dual collaborative interaction between patients and pharmacists, with or without the provision of a therapeutic substance, confers undoubted benefits to the total healthcare system.

As healthcare literacy increases, patients are also taking more control over their treatment, prevention, and everyday health needs. Many are driven to be more informed and involved with their healthcare, blurring the divide between patients and healthcare professionals. It is important for these patients to know how community pharmacies can help them take action, ensuring access to the right care at the right time.

Now, more than ever, we have the opportunity to re-define the role we want community pharmacy to play, and the role that is needed of us. The task is a mindset shift: from managing sickness to promoting wellness. The needs are greater, but the pharmacy profession is there and can and will be mobilised. And, as pharmacists, we are aware of our responsibility as healthcare providers to support self-care, along with its critical prerequisites, such as patient and consumer empowerment, and health literacy.

The International Pharmaceutical Federation (FIP), which represents the pharmacy profession globally, has a mission to advance pharmacy worldwide by sharing best pharmacy practice and innovation with the world. During the COVID-19 crisis we have experienced how virtual practice became more prominent as face-to-face meetings became impossible, how pharmacists' scope of practice has been extended, and how pharmacy educators have embraced digital technologies to teach and assess students remotely. In particular, pharmacists' involvement in the COVID-19 vaccination programmes indicates an exciting future for the profession.

Health ministers and heads of state have been praising pharmacists for their service, and FIP wants governments to translate this recognition into support for expanded roles and scientific research. FIP continues to gather data and intelligence to support an expansion of pharmacy practice, education and pharmaceutical workforce that builds on the profession's scientific base.

Background

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines self-care as “the ability of individuals, families and communities to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health, and to cope with illness and disability with or without the support of a healthcare provider”.ⁱ While self-care is effective when undertaken by individuals independently, having the support, guidance, and advice of a healthcare provider, such as a pharmacist, can provide even greater benefits.

*For more information, please see our **position on the value of self-care**.*

“As accessible, trusted, and knowledgeable healthcare workers, pharmacists represent the first point of contact within the health system for many communities, and, as such, play an important educational role. There is much evidence demonstrating that pharmacist input into self-care is highly effective. Our capabilities relating to self-care include disease prevention, immunisation, detection of diseases via point of care testing and the management of chronic diseases, or non-communicable diseases, but there are misconceptions about that. Pharmacy and pharmacists can do a lot more.”

Lars-Åke Söderlund, Vice President, International Pharmaceutical Federation (FIP)

Pharmacists are at the heart of the communities they serve and are the most accessible health experts. For example, in Europe 58% of people have a community pharmacy within a 5-minute walk of their home.ⁱⁱ This makes pharmacists extremely well-placed to provide essential health advice and support for self-care behaviours, as their knowledge and skills are sought by everyone from teenagers to new parents, to older adults and everyone in-between.

This role is particularly important as only 20% of Europeans feel confident in addressing their health-related issues independently.ⁱⁱⁱ By taking a patient-centred approach, pharmacists provide evidence-based, accurate, and accessible self-care information to guide people to make well-informed choices in pharmacy and beyond. This includes information around healthy life choices, recommending appropriate non-prescription medications, identifying when people should consult a physician, and educating patients on how to interact with health information.^{iv,v} An independent study found that 43% of consultations with pharmacists result in people altering their intended purchases, highlighting the importance of pharmacy advice for self-care choices.^{vi}

Integration of pharmacists into primary care structures

Pharmacists are a vital part of a thriving healthcare system, acting as a gateway to care, and are health advisors. However, the structure of health systems can silo healthcare professionals (HCPs), and exclude self-care practices, meaning that valuable information from pharmacists may be inaccessible to doctors, and vice versa.^{vii} Therefore, it is important to make sure that pharmacies are fully integrated into health system processes, strategies, and priorities to provide end to end patient care.

“Better integration of pharmacists within healthcare systems has to be the priority... In Africa, the priority disease prevention programmes, are managed at a ground level by doctors. Yet, even simple changes such as the distribution via pharmacies of long-lasting bed nets to prevent malaria would make so much sense and be a huge step forward and a massive help for everyone.”

Dr Prosper Hiag, President, African Pharmaceutical Forum

In the UK, Pharmacy First schemes aim to provide a service to users who might have otherwise attended their GP or A&E for the treatment of self-treatable conditions. The scheme has proven to be a cost-effective way to manage patients presenting to GPs with minor ailments. In the first eight months of Bradford City Clinical Commissioning Group’s (CCG) pilot, over 900 hours of GP time was saved, mainly from patients seeking pharmacists’ advice to treat the symptoms of coughs, colds, and fever. Similarly, in the Isle of Wight, the CCG found that on average 500 residents now consult a pharmacist every month instead of booking a GP appointment.^{viii}

One way in which pharmacists can be better integrated into primary care systems is by creating centralised digital health records that are accessible to multidisciplinary teams, inclusive of pharmacists and relevant self-care information. This would create a smoother and more efficient process of sharing patient data, facilitating the dialogue between pharmacists and other healthcare professionals.^{ix, x, xi} Giving pharmacists access to these records could also help to limit potential errors by highlighting allergies or drug interactions, identifying trends, prompting preventative measures, and strengthening the provision of evidence-based care.^{xii, xiii} A US study found that such digital patient records can successfully identify cases of inappropriate prescribing and the affected patients.^{xiv}

In the UK, NHS Digital is working to include community pharmacists in Summary Care Records (SCR), to alert them of patients’ medication doses, allergies, and emergency prescriptions. Therefore, community pharmacists are empowered to support patients through access to relevant patient information.^{xv}

The role of pharmacists in improving health education and health literacy

Health literacy – “the knowledge, motivation, and competencies of people to access, understand, appraise, and apply information to manage health in everyday life regarding health care, disease prevention, and health promotion to maintain and promote quality of life during the life course” - is paramount for effective self-care.^{xvi}

*For more information, please see our **position on health literacy and self-care**.*

Pharmacists are well-placed to provide public health education and disease prevention, and are trained to support and facilitate patients in making effective health choices. In this way, they proactively help to improve health literacy. For example, pharmacists support individuals to use non-prescription medicines correctly and responsibly - a core component of self-care. Furthermore, in the prevention of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), pharmacists work to raise patient awareness; educate and counsel; identify risk factors; support lifestyle changes like smoking cessation; and help patients to navigate their care pathway.^{xvii xviii}

In New Mexico USA, pharmacists have been able to prescribe all smoking cessation medications approved by the Food & Drug Administration (FDA) since 2004, and their smoking cessation services have proven to be just as effective as those provided by other HCPs. Their service was particularly impactful because 64% of the participants did not have health insurance and were unlikely to receive smoking cessation services from another healthcare access point.^{xix}

Through the “Check My Medicines” programme in Sweden, community pharmacists worked with older patients to empower their understanding and management of the medicines they were taking, as well as to reduce inappropriate prescribing. Its success in improving medication usage and compliance for Swedish elderly has led to new laws being implemented that include medicine utilisation reviews as a service within pharmacy and in collaboration with other healthcare professionals.^{xx}

With an overwhelming amount of information related to health available online, pharmacists also have a role in mitigating misinformation and helping people understand their everyday health.^{xxi}

“As pharmacists, we have a social responsibility to ensure patients and health consumers have the correct information, that we are really precise and they are really clear, there’s often lots of confusion and misinformation.”

Nadezhda Yakovleva, Practicing Pharmacist, Russia

Supporting pharmacist resources, resilience, and wellbeing

“The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated significant changes within the healthcare sector. Pharmacists quickly adapted to novel work methods and new digital services to meet demand, resulting in recognition by regulatory bodies and the general population. In the pandemic, the pharmacy was the place you went for health advice, to navigate the changing evidence-base, and to get safe and sustained supplies of medicines. Community pharmacies remained open, and as such, the impact of pharmacy was highlighted. In short, the pharmacy profession demonstrated expertise, strength, courage, and dedication to care at the highest level.”

Lars-Åke Söderlund, Vice President, International Pharmaceutical Federation (FIP)

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, data revealed that as many as 87% of pharmacists in China had burnout indicators, and that 58% of UK pharmacists found their job stressful, with up to one in six expected to leave the profession within the next five years.^{xxii} Increasing pressure during the COVID-19 pandemic has further impacted the wellbeing of pharmacy staff. A study by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society has found that 31% of pharmacists reported that their mental health and wellbeing was impacted by COVID-19.^{xxiii}

To support pharmacists and release pharmacy resources for activities like patient counselling and self-care advice, pharmacy workload and reimbursement models need to change. Understanding that inadequate staffing contributed to pharmacists’ experience of burnout during the pandemic, it is important that workforce support is available to pharmacists and that they can dedicate time where it is most valuable.^{xxiv} Current pharmacy incentives and remuneration systems focus on dispensing rather than advising. Pharmacy reimbursement is often directly proportional to prescription volume, impacting the pharmacists’ prioritisation of time and resources. This limits their ability to focus on other activities designed to support their patients and customers in the ways described here.

“Remember that pharmacists have to jump between dispensing and then stepping in front of the counter to be coach and counsellor.”

Dr Aska Patel, Practicing Pharmacist, Canada

Pharmacists in Canada are being incentivised to provide cardiovascular prevention, education, and counselling. Existing research from the Conference Board of Canada shows that between 2016 and 2035, \$25.7bn could be saved by expanding community pharmacy services in cardiovascular disease, smoking cessation, and pneumococcal vaccination through direct healthcare costs and indirect costs in productivity gains.^{xxv}

Policy recommendations

“Now, more than ever, we have the opportunity to deliver and define the role that we want community pharmacy to play, and the role that is needed of us. The task is a mindset shift: from managing sickness to promoting wellness. The needs are greater, but the pharmacy profession is there and can and will be mobilised. And, as pharmacists, we are aware of our responsibility as healthcare providers to support self-care, along with its critical prerequisites, such as patient and consumer empowerment, and health literacy.

“Everyone is a winner when we prevent a person from becoming a patient in healthcare. The professional services provided by pharmacists reaffirm their commitment to primary healthcare; and, in turn pharmacies can be leveraged as gateways to care, as trusted sources of advice and medicines, and as accessible healthcare facilities at the heart of each community.”

Lars-Åke Söderlund, Vice President, International Pharmaceutical Federation (FIP)

To enable pharmacists to support individual wellbeing and promote self-care, we believe that governments, policymakers, health systems, regulators, industry, trade associations, HCPs, and citizens should work together to:

- Recognise pharmacy as a core pillar of healthcare systems, particularly in primary care;
- Adopt models of primary care where pharmacy is fully integrated, with full access to medical records;

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- Support the mental health and wellbeing of pharmacists and their teams;
 - Evolve pharmacy education to include a greater emphasis on self-care, communication, and coaching skills; and
 - Incentivise patient counselling, health literacy, and self-care interventions through altered remuneration.

*For more information on how we engage policymakers, please see our **position on political advocacy**.*

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