



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF PHARMACEUTICAL RESEARCH AND BIO-SCIENCE

PHARMACISTS AS A PART OF HEALTH CARE SYSTEM: A SURVEY OUTCOME AND REFLECTIONS



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IJPRBS-QR CODE

PAPER-QR CODE

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Abstract

Accepted Date:

27/12/2012

Publish Date:

27/02/2013

Keywords

Health Care,
Pharmacists,
Professional,
Patients,
Dispensing,
Performance

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The present study is an attempt at assessing the patient perspective in context with the role played by a pharmacist working in dispensaries. The survey was based on a semi-structured interview consisting questions pertaining to the various attributes of an ideal pharmacist like being assiduous, pro-active and having other professional competencies. A total number of 90 out patients from ten randomly selected dispensaries were interviewed for the survey. The survey revealed that there is lot of scope in improvement even in the fulfillment of primary role of pharmacist i.e. dispensing medications, though the patients expect him to do much more than mere dispensing. In spite of this gap in the expectations and the perceived performance, the society still recognizes the pharmacist as indispensable part of the health care system. The article also discusses some of the possible causes for the below par performance of the pharmacist and suggests some remedial measures for bringing him/her closer to the society's expectations.

INTRODUCTION

The traditional role of pharmacist is dispensing medicines. However, of late there has been gradual reduction in emphasis on this role of pharmacist. He is expected to be more active in achieving positive patient outcome by embracing the new role in counseling, identifying, preventing & solving medication related problems and collaborating with other health care professionals. Understanding the public's view of professional competency is extremely important particularly for professionals like pharmacists, who are interacting with public. Pharmacists may be very clear on what "important" duties they carry out on behalf of their patients. However it may be worthwhile to assess, if his activities are appreciated or even understood by the users of his services. Fortunately, information available from some countries seems to indicate that people respect and appreciate the pharmacist¹. Pharmacists consistently finish high in public opinion polls on the honesty and ethical standards of various professions^{2,3}. To ascertain patient's perceptions of role of pharmacist, a survey was carried out at ten chemists

shop in Chopda (MAH). This paper describes the methodology and results of the survey.

OBJECTIVE

The aim of the present study is to:

- Assess the role played by a pharmacist employed in Medical stores in Chopda.
- To study whether the pharmacist plays a role of a pro-active professional.

METHODOLOGY

Selection of Health Care Facilities

Ten medical stores were selected at random for the study. The criterion of the facility selection was mainly the ease of commuting.

Preparation of questionnaire

A simple questionnaire was prepared. The questions included in the questionnaire were selected to assess patient's expectation and perspective about pharmacist's role in the health-care system. A close ended, simple to understand, comprehensible, question format was deliberately designed to keep away any inadvertent bias in interpreting specific responses. Given to understand the hassled

situation in which an outpatient usually is; this format was found to garner quick response, while enabling them to answer with ease, still respecting the intentions of the survey.

The questionnaire used in the study is as under:

1. Is the pharmacist available at the designated hours?
2. Is the pharmacist a mere vendor/dispenser of prescription drugs?
3. Does he offer counseling without asking?
4. Does he extract information about the compliance to the previously dispensed prescription?
5. Does he enquire about the related health problems and any other medication used in the past?
6. Do you perceive a pharmacist as an indispensable and effective part of the healthcare system?
7. Does he dispense Schedule H drugs without prescription?
8. Does the Pharmacist instruct about timings of drug administration?

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

A total of 90 patients were interviewed across the hospitals and dispensaries. The data was analyzed independently by the researchers and was collated and statistically treated. The information gathered during the study is analyzed below:

Availability

For any professional particularly those directly interacting with the public, availability at the designated hours is one of the fundamental requirements. The availability should be very close to 100%. However, our study reveals that the availability was 80%. **(Figure 1)**

Expectations from pharmacist

The objective of including this question was to take hold of expectations of the patients from the pharmacist. The survey indicates that significant majority of the patients expect the pharmacists to do much more than dispensing of medicine. Only 33% respondents perceived him as mere vendor while 67% of them had a higher expectation from him as a professional. **(Figure 2)**

Proactive

Members of any progressive profession must be proactive. If majority of the members of a profession follow laid-back approach, the profession may lose relevance for the society as other related profession may fulfill this gap. The results of the survey are not very encouraging. Only 3% of the surveyed patients reported suomoto counseling by the pharmacist. **(Figure 3)**

Fulfillment of primary role

(a) Clear instructions

As mentioned earlier, dispensing medications is the primary role of the pharmacist. Imparting clear instructions to the patient about the medications forms part of this primary role. One of the questions sought to know whether the pharmacist gives instructions about timing of the drug administration, which is the fundamental information that the patient must have. The survey shows that majority of the patients (84%) reported that the pharmacist gave instructions about timing of drug administration. **(Figure 4)**

(b) Compliance

The information about compliance of the previously dispensed medication is an important feedback for the pharmacist and also forms part of his traditional role of dispensing. Such information enables him not only to understand the patient behavior but also proffers reasons for the same. For example an elderly patient may not be able to take medications due to difficulty in opening the bottle or a patient may avoid a medicine linking it with some Adverse Drug Reaction noted by him/her. Without such information the pharmacist may not be able to take remedial action to improve patient compliance. The survey however, reveals that performance of pharmacist is not very good in this respect. Only a meager 15% of respondents replied in positive while 85% of the participants gave a negative reply, thus showing the pharmacist in a very poor light. **(Figure 5)**

Solving medication related problems

Avoidance of drug-drug interaction and adverse drug reaction is an important role; a modern age pharmacist is expected to play. Without knowing the other health related problems and other medications used at present or in recent past, this role

cannot be played. About half the interviewed patients (54%) reported that the pharmacist does not inquire about other health related problems. Thus, the results of the survey indicate that pharmacist is required to take more initiation in this regard. (Figure 6)

Relevance in the society

As already mentioned, if members of any profession are not perceived as essential or indispensable, the future of that profession seems to be uncertain. The survey indicates that though a majority of the patients (61%) felt that pharmacist is indispensable and effective part of the health care system, this majority is not overwhelming. Already there are indications that patients are depending on physicians for instructions about dosage regimen and other general health related issues. If corrective action is not taken urgently, the future of pharmacy profession does not appear to be very bright. (Figure 7)

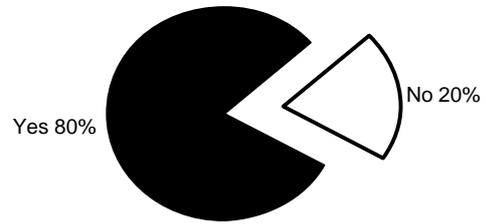


Figure 1: Is Pharmacist available at the designated Hours?

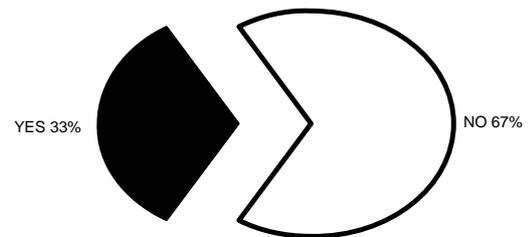


Figure 2: Is the pharmacist a mere vendor/dispenser of prescription drugs?

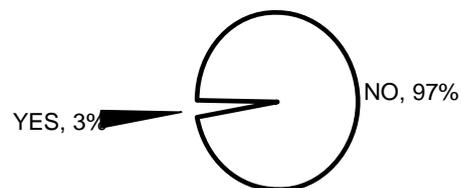


Figure 3: Does he offer counseling without asking?

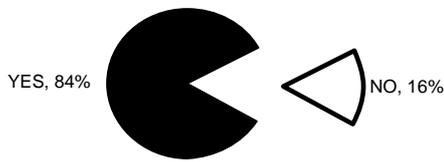


Fig. 4: Does the Pharmacist instruct about timings of drug administration?

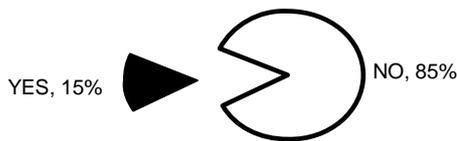


Fig. 5: Does he extract information about the compliance to the previously dispensed prescription?

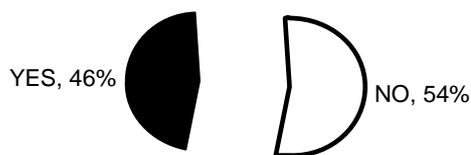


Fig. 6: Does he enquire about the related health problems and any other medication used in the past?

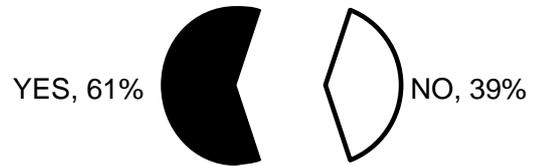


Fig. 7: Do you perceive a pharmacist as an indispensable and effective part of the healthcare system?

DISCUSSION

As per our finding, pharmacists were not perceived merely as vendor/dispenser of prescription drugs by the consumers in the hospitals and dispensaries^{4,5}. Thus, the society expects the pharmacist to play a definite role in the positive patient outcome by taking pro-active role in counseling, spreading health awareness etc. This was further confirmed by finding that the pharmacist is viewed as an integral part of the health care system. But as far as the counseling to the patients is considered, our finding conforms to Hall and colleagues^{5,6,7}, in which they reported that over 61% of the respondents had wanted information in pharmacies at times in the past, but could not or did not find anyone to ask. The Indian scenario presents a poorer picture of a mere 54.4% of the

patients reported that the Pharmacists offered the counseling. In the process of counseling there are two mechanisms: Patients can either ask for assistance or Pharmacists staff can offer it. Reports indicate that when advice is received, the process is initiated almost exclusively by the patients⁽⁸⁾. Pharmacist often fails to collect adequate data regarding the drugs taken and history of ailment if the process of counseling is not undertaken efficiently by the pharmacist. This is evident from our findings that in majority of the cases, the pharmacist did not even ask about compliance to the previously dispensed medications and in only about half the cases desired to know the other health related problems and medications used in the past. In our view pharmacists should consider that opportunities to discuss clinical issues might be created by initial enquiries on product location. This might lead to encouragement amongst the patients to feel free to ask the pharmacist for further assistance and may prove valuable (if not already done). Now, coming to the reasons for the pharmacist not performing the role expected of him, one has to take a holistic view. With the

continuing population growth and meager per capita income, a large part of the mammoth population depends solely on the government hospitals and dispensaries. The government, on the other hand, finds it difficult to open enough hospitals and dispensaries owing to resource crunch.

Another reason could be that most of the pharmacists working in dispensaries hold diploma in pharmacy; the graduates/postgraduates being attracted towards more lucrative careers in manufacturing, marketing or opt for higher education to enter into academics or R&D. Thus, the career of pharmacist in dispensaries is an automatic outcome rather than a choice. The salaries, perks and opportunities for career growth for the pharmacist are not attractive. The lack of any motivating factor may be one of the contributing factors to the findings coming out of this survey. Another reason, which may be peculiar to India or other South-Asian countries, is that here physicians enjoy a status of demigod and other health professionals have a diminutive stature and are generally regarded as sub-servient. Patients like to discuss their problems with the treating physicians due to their

immense faith in them. The physician often acts upon advice given by other health care professionals only on confirmation. This situation has arisen because of gap in the roles played by other health care professionals or due to superior role accorded to the physician. This aspect definitely needs further evaluation. However, there should not be any doubt that once pharmacist consistently start playing pro-active role, the physicians would save their valuable time for their primary role, which will be in the overall interest of the society.

CONCLUSION

The attributes linked to an ideal pharmacist can be summed up as being positive, hardworking, being able to reach out to patient, assess their hesitations and promptly offer solution but unfortunately as the survey indicates many of them seem to be missing in a practicing pharmacist. In a country like India, with a population of over one billion, a pro-active, fulfilling role of health care personnel like pharmacist is more than desired. Hence, a pharmacist in order to salvage his professional image should play a "pro-active" role in becoming

an effective and indispensable part of health care. He should be able to advice, guide, direct and persuade the patient to comply correct usage of drugs. He should equip himself with appropriate knowledge and competencies in order to render efficient and outstanding Pharmaceutical health care.

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