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Community pharmacist's responsibilities with regards to traditional medicine/complementary medicine products: A systematic literature review

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Abstract

Background: The use of Traditional Medicine/Complementary Medicine (TM/CM) products has gained popularity in many countries. There is a growing body of evidence to support that concomitant use of TM/CM products with certain pharmaceutical medicines may adversely affect treatment outcomes. There is a general consensus that pharmacists have a role to play in the safe and appropriate use of these products. However, the extent of their involvement and responsibilities are not yet defined. Clear guidelines that inform their duty of care are essential for pharmacists to establish their role in the management of TM/CM product use.

Objectives: The purpose of this study was to determine pharmacist's responsibilities with regards to TM/CM products that have been discussed in the literature since 2000.

Methods: A literature search in 3 electronic databases (Web of Science, Science Direct and PubMed) was used to extract publications from 2000 to 2015 that related *pharmacist* to *TM/CM products*. Out of the 2859 publications extracted for abstract review, 171 documents were selected for full text assessment. 41 publications which reported findings from exploratory studies or discussed pharmacists' responsibilities towards TM/CM products were selected for inclusion in this study.

Results: Seven major responsibilities were frequently discussed in the literature: (1) to acknowledge the use; (2) to be knowledgeable about the TM/CM products; (3) to ensure safe use of TM/CM products; (4) to document the use of TM/CM products; (5) to report ADRs related to TM/CM products; (6) to educate about TM/CM products; and (7) to collaborate with other health care professionals.

Conclusion: Various forms and levels of pharmacists' responsibilities with TM/CM products have been mentioned in the literature. Subsequent work towards a common consensus must take into account three influential factors strategically: the scope of TM/CM products, objectives of pharmacists' involvement and the perspectives of key stakeholders.

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Keywords: Pharmacist; Responsibilities; Traditional Medicine; Complementary Medicine

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Introduction

Traditional Medicine (TM), according to the definition adopted by the World Health Organization, is the sum total of the knowledge, skills, and practices based on the theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used in the maintenance of health as well as in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical and mental illness.¹ A typical example is the traditional Chinese medicine in China. The term “Complementary Medicine (CM)” refers to a broad set of health care practices that are not part of that country’s own tradition and are not integrated into the dominant health care system.¹ CM may be used inter-changeably with TM in countries when the practices are used together with conventional medicine. For instance in the United States, many Americans—more than 30% of adults and about 12% of children—use health care approaches developed outside of mainstream Western, or conventional, medicine.² These approaches are often referred as CM. TM/CM approaches may fall into one of two subgroups—products or practices. Depending on the strength of cultural influence, the structure of the health care system and current regulations in any given country, different forms of TM and/or CM practice and products may exist. Specifically, the subgroup of TM/CM products pose a direct influence on consumers’ safe, effective and rational use of medicines.

The term “TM/CM products” used in this study refers collectively to products of TM, CM, complementary and alternative medicine products, dietary supplement, herbal medicine, health supplement, vitamins, minerals and natural products. TM/CM products have become increasingly popular across the countries. Hundreds of million people are believed to use TM/CM in the European Union (EU) alone, with estimates as high as 90% of the population in some countries.³ In 2012, global sales of Chinese herbal medicine reached US\$83 billion, up by more than 20% from 2011.¹ The global market for all herbal supplements and remedies is expected to reach US\$115 billion by 2020, with Europe being the largest and the Asia-Pacific the fastest growing markets.¹ Significant increase in expenditure has also been reported in many countries such as the United States, Canada, Asia, and Australia.^{1,3–9} The increase in usage also indicates growing prevalence of self-medication with TM/CM products.

Self-management, patient autonomy and a desire to manage health conditions with a “natural or holistic” approach leads to high prevalence of self-medication with TM/CM products.^{10–12} While these products were once predominantly used for health maintenance or minor conditions, more and more patients are using them concurrently with conventional medicines to self-treat chronic or even serious illnesses such as arthritis, diabetes mellitus, cardiovascular diseases, anxiety disorder, and depression.^{13–18} Some oncology patients and renal and liver transplant recipients may use TM/CM products to improve the efficacy and reduce the side effects of conventional medicines or to help improve their general well-being.^{19,20}

The way some TM/CM products are reportedly being used in the treatment and prevention of disease is concerning. The popularity of TM/CM products is associated with a perception or belief that TM/CM products are safe. However, this belief is not fully supported by the emerging body of data highlighting the true prevalence of adverse reactions and drug interactions. Studies have repeatedly demonstrated the potential risks for serious toxicities and adverse reactions with the use of TM/CM products.^{21–24} In China, out of the 1.33 million case reports of adverse drug event (ADE)/adverse drug reaction (ADR) received by the National ADR Monitoring Center received in 2014, TCM drugs represented around 17.3% (equivalent to around 230,000 cases).²⁵ Patients with chronic diseases and compromised physiological functions such as hepatic insufficiency may be at a greater risk of hepatotoxicity from herbal medications.¹⁸ Certain patient populations including the elderly taking multiple medications or those who are compromised physiologically are at an increased risk of drug-drug, drug-herb and drug-nutrient interactions.^{13,26–32} A number of factors relating to TM/CM use further contribute to the safety concerns including: easy access to TM/CM products, mixed and confusing information regarding the health claims, reluctance by patients to disclose their TM/CM use with health-care professionals, reluctance by health care professionals to ask patients about TM/CM use.^{32–34} The use/misuse of TM/CM products without sufficient professional supervision is not only a risk to the individual but it can also become a complicating public health issue in any given health care system.

According to a growing body of evidence, there is general support for the pharmacist’s

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