



SHORT COMMUNICATION

Exploring medication use by blind patients in Saudi Arabia



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Abstract Objective: To explore the characteristics of medication use and challenges experienced by the blind patients.

Methods: This cross-sectional descriptive study included blind persons living in Saudi Arabia who were at least 18 years of age. Participants were recruited through a number of nongovernmental blind associations (in the central, western, eastern regions), universities, social networks, and specialized websites for the blind. A questionnaire was designed and administered via face-to-face meetings with participants and made available online through Google Docs.

Results: There were a total of 121 respondents of which 26 were excluded based on their ability to visually identify their medications or being < 18 years old. The majority of the respondents were 18–29 years old (68%), 49% were male and 51% were female. Around 57% had a college degree while 27% had a high school degree. Diagnosis with a chronic disease was reported by 71 participants (79%, 5 missing). The most common diseases were diabetes and asthma (22%) followed by hypertension (17%). Most blind patients (75%) believed that physicians were the most reliable source of medication information. The medication information and services provided by pharmacists were viewed as inadequate by 46%. The most common challenges encountered by blind patients were linked to drug identification (75%), dose recognition (82%), and identification of expiration date (92%). A large number of patients had to rely on persons with normal vision for dispensing and administering the medications.

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Conclusions: Pharmacists can no longer ignore the medication use problems encountered by the blind people. This study may serve as an initial step for planning improvements in pharmaceutical services provided to blind patients. The government, pharmaceutical companies and pharmacists must work in collaboration to address the special needs of the blind.

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1. Introduction

In 2010, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimated the number of visually impaired people to be 285 million, of whom 39 million are blind. The leading causes of blindness worldwide include cataract, glaucoma and age-related macular degeneration. About 90% of people who have impaired vision live in developing countries. In the Eastern-Mediterranean Region, the WHO estimates that 5 million people (about 13% of the total population) are blind (Pascolini and Mariotti, 2012). The prevalence of blindness in Saudi Arabia was based on an old 1980s community based survey that revealed that 1.5% of the population were blind. That study also found that the most common cause of blindness in Saudi Arabia was cataract (Tabbara, 2001). A more recent study that included adult population attending primary health care centers in Aljouf province showed that the prevalence of blindness according to the WHO criteria was 0.8% (Al-Shaalin et al., 2011).

Visually impaired people have health information needs that when successfully addressed should result in improvement in disease management and quality of life. Few studies have examined the unique needs of this population. Receiving written information in inaccessible formats, difficulties in communicating with practitioners, and need for assistance with getting around healthcare facilities have been reported as concerns by visually impaired people (Beverley et al., 2004; Cupples et al., 2012; Sharts-Hopko et al., 2010).

Studies focusing on medication utilization by blind people are also limited. Published studies involved visually impaired persons in general and mainly explored the numbers and types of medications used or focused on difficulties using particular drugs (e.g. glaucoma medications) (Castro et al., 2010; Sleath et al., 2009). Reading medication labels, administering eye drops, and measuring liquid doses are some of the difficulties that have been reported. A recent study in Bangkok provided more insight on medication use problems encountered by blind patients as well as their coping with these problems. The study identified problems with identifying medications and doses, taking medications at the right time and recognizing expired medications (Riewpaiboon, 2009).

To the best of our knowledge, no published studies on the use of medications by blind Saudi patients have been reported in the literature. Because such data are the cornerstone for planning improvements in pharmaceutical services provided to this group of patients, this study was designed to explore the characteristics of medication use and challenges experienced by the blind patients. The specific objectives of the study are to describe how blind patients receive and use their medications, identify types of pharmaceutical services that are currently provided, and finally discover some of the encountered medication use challenges and relate them to possible solutions.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design

Cross-sectional descriptive study.

2.2. Participants

This study included blind persons living in Saudi Arabia who were at least 18 years of age. Participants were recruited through a number of non governmental blind associations (in the central, western, eastern regions), universities, social networks, and specialized websites for the blind (online forums directed toward providing services to blind people). The sample was selected based on the convenience of sampling over a period of five weeks. Persons were excluded if they were visually able to identify their medication characteristics.

2.3. Data collection

A questionnaire was designed based on data from the literature review. It consisted of 5 sections: demographic data, medical status, medication use characteristics, source of medication information, and difficulties with medication use. The survey was piloted for timing and ambiguities and adjustments were made as necessary.

When logistically feasible, the researches administered the survey via face-to-face meetings with participants. In addition, the survey was made available online through Google Docs and the link to the survey was sent to the participating blind associations and publicized on social networks and websites.

2.4. Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to report results.

3. Results

There were a total of 121 respondents of which 26 were excluded based on their ability to visually identify their medications or being <18 years old. Table 1 shows the demographic data of the 95 people included in the study. The majority of the respondents were 18–29 years old (68%), 49% were male and 51% were female. Around 57% had a college degree while 27% had a high school degree. Only 33% of participants reported having a job. Most participants (49%) were diagnosed with blindness at birth and 91% were able to read the Braille alphabet. Diagnosis with a chronic disease was reported by 71 participants (79%, 5 missing). The most common diseases were diabetes and asthma (22%) followed by hypertension (17%). Around half of the subjects (54%)

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