

## Research

# Perceptions of pharmacy students and pharmacists on SOAP note education and utility in pharmacy practice

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## Abstract

**Objective:** To assess the perceptions of pharmacy students and pharmacists in Asia on the education of SOAP notes and their use as a communication tool.

**Methods:** This was a multicenter, cross-sectional study in which a questionnaire was administered to the final-year pharmacy students and the practicing pharmacists. Usefulness and importance of SOAP notes were measured via a 5-point Likert scale which ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

**Results:** A total of 198 students and 119 practicing pharmacists were included. Both pharmacists and pharmacy students found SOAP notes to be useful ( $p=0.012$ ) and important ( $p=0.023$ ). Comparing to pharmacy students, practicing pharmacists were two times more agreeable to incorporate SOAP notes into the pharmacy curriculum ( $p = 0.004$ ). Pharmacists agreed that the use of SOAP notes improves communication between pharmacy colleagues (63.9%), and between pharmacists and physicians (62.2%); however, fewer participants agreed that SOAP would improve communication between pharmacists and nurses (31.9%), or between pharmacists and allied health professionals (34.5%).

**Conclusion:** In Asia, pharmacy students and practicing pharmacists agreed that SOAP note writing is an essential skill that should be taught in the pharmacy curriculum and practiced in the clinical settings.

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**Keywords:** Perceptions; SOAP note; Interprofessional communication; Pharmacy education; Pharmacists

## Introduction

The SOAP note (subjective, objective, assessment, and plan) is a problem-oriented documentation format for the systematic classification of the types of information obtained and interventions undertaken during a patient encounter.<sup>1</sup> SOAP notes were first developed by physicians

in the early 1960s to facilitate the written communication of patients' medical records among physicians to ensure a continuum of care.<sup>2</sup> With the shift from physician-centered care to an interprofessional team-based approach to health care, SOAP notes have become a universally recognized form of documentation that is widely used by physicians and other clinicians, including pharmacists.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, this type of documentation is perceived as an interprofessional communication tool among health care professionals.<sup>3,4</sup>

In the delivery of effective pharmaceutical care, well-documented patient medical records improve the acceptance rates of the drug therapies recommended by pharmacists,

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enhance the continuity of care, protect against professional liability, and create records of the services provided for billing and reimbursement purposes.<sup>5</sup> The American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP) Guidelines (2003) on Documenting Pharmaceutical Care in Patient Medical Records advocate the use of a standardized format such as SOAP notes and emphasize the importance of training and continuous quality improvement in documentation.<sup>5,6</sup> In the United States, pharmacy students are taught how to write SOAP notes early in their pharmacy education so that they are familiar with the SOAP note format and are able to routinely incorporate the technique into their patient assessments. Students are also required to write SOAP notes throughout their clerkships to help them construct rational drug therapy plans for their patients in an organized and systematic manner regardless of the case's complexity.<sup>7</sup>

As the benefits of collaborative care have become more evident, pharmacists in Asia have also begun to provide more direct patient care, and more health care institutions have adopted the interprofessional care model. The concerted use of SOAP notes by pharmacists has also increased as more pharmacists engage in direct patient care activities.<sup>8–10</sup> In line with the pharmacy curricula in the United States, education on the SOAP note format has been incorporated into pharmacy curricula in Asia via didactic lectures and regular case discussion sessions in pharmacotherapy classes. In Singapore, the Singapore Pharmacy Council's competency standards for pharmacy training (2011) state that students on externships are expected to write numerous SOAP notes during their training.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the Thai Pharmacy Council's core competency standards for pharmacist training (2012) state that pharmacy students in Thailand are expected to learn how to manage drug-related problems. Hence, students are required to write SOAP notes in the majority of the pharmacotherapy courses in Thailand.<sup>12</sup> Although education on the SOAP note format was incorporated into the Thai pharmacy curriculum more than a decade ago, education on the SOAP note format in Singapore only began in 2007.

Although SOAP notes have been used for several decades as a tool for communication, perceptions of the usefulness of SOAP notes among pharmacy students and practicing pharmacists have yet to be documented in the literature.<sup>5,10</sup> More importantly, as more Asian schools (such as those in Singapore and Thailand) strive for excellence in clinical pharmacy education, it is important to identify whether this fundamental communication skill is perceived as useful and valuable. Hence, we designed this study to assess the perceptions of pharmacy students and pharmacists in Asia regarding the education of SOAP notes and their importance and usefulness as a communication tool. In addition, we compared the perceptions between the pharmacists and pharmacy students, as well as between pharmacists who practice in hospital and community health care settings.

## Methods

### *Study design and participants*

This was a multicenter, cross-sectional study for which pharmacists and pharmacy students from Singapore and Thailand were recruited. In Singapore, the pharmacy degree is a four year undergraduate program, and since 2007, students have been taught to write SOAP notes during their second and fourth year of study. SOAP notes were not formally introduced in the pharmacy curriculum before 2007. In Thailand, pharmacy students complete a six-year entry-level Doctor of Pharmacy program, and the students are taught to write SOAP notes in their fourth year. Students in both countries are required to use the SOAP note format to write patient cases in all pharmacotherapy modules. This study was endorsed by the Institutional Review Boards of the National University of Singapore, Singapore (13-073) and Ubon Ratchathani University, Thailand.

### *Data Collection and Instruments*

Two sets of voluntary, self-administered, anonymous questionnaires were provided to the pharmacy students and the practicing pharmacists. No incentives were provided to the participants. The final-year pharmacy students in Singapore and Thailand were approached at the end of their lectures for the administration of a paper-based questionnaire. On the other hand, the pharmacists' survey was administered online to those who graduated after 2007. Pharmacists were identified through the alumni databases from National University of Singapore and Ubon Ratchathani University. The pharmacists' questionnaire was presented online using a survey tool called SurveyMonkey<sup>®</sup> (<http://www.surveymonkey.com/>). A web link to the questionnaire was e-mailed to potential participants on March 20, 2013. Because the questionnaire was administered online, the collected responses were aggregated and the participants remained anonymous.

Both forms of the questionnaire were designed by the study investigators and were pilot-tested with ten pharmacists to ensure the clarity of the survey questions. In Singapore, the survey was administered in English, whereas a backward- and forward-translated Thai version was administered to the participants in Thailand. The translation closely followed the guidelines stipulated by the Translation and Cultural Adaptation-Principles of Good Practice.<sup>13</sup>

The pharmacy students were given a 14-item survey that was divided into two sections: (i) the participants' demographic information and (ii) their perceptions of the education, importance and usefulness of SOAP notes. The responses were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The following questions were designed to assess the respondents' perceptions of the education of SOAP notes: (i) The use of SOAP notes should be incorporated into all therapeutics modules; (ii) I teach others (such as my juniors)

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