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Research Article

Perceptions of pharmacists' role in the health care team through student-pharmacist led point-of-care screenings and its future application in health care



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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The public is largely unaware of changing pharmacy roles and continues to underutilize pharmacists as mainly a dispensing service, often overlooking direct patient care components. This paper evaluates the public perceptions of pharmacists' through student led point-of-care screenings and comprehensive medication reviews.

Methods: An IRB approved longitudinal retrospective study design was used to survey participants who attended College of Pharmacy sponsored health fairs in 2013. The survey contained questions related to patient understanding of the current pharmacy scope of practice, patient's reported level of comfort with the expanding roles of pharmacy, insurance coverage, demographics, income and whom the patients report that they seek first for medical related advice.

Results: One hundred participants were surveyed. By a large majority, the health care practitioner that patients reported that they currently sought out for general health information was a physician. All of the participants reported that they considered pharmacists as reliable sources of general health information. Of the 96 participants that completed the survey question regarding their willingness to seek out a pharmacist in the future to have their blood pressure, blood sugar, cholesterol, and/or bone density checked, 89 (92.7%) surveyed answered yes. Only 50 patients (50%) reported being aware that pharmacists have the capability to perform these point-of-care screenings. Participants responded that they felt "comfortable" (78 patients, 83.4%) followed by "trusting" (36 patients, 38.7%).

Discussion: The patients surveyed recognized pharmacists as the medication experts; however, many did not understand the capacity to which pharmacists' scope of practice allows them to deliver care to patients. In this study, almost all of the patients stated that they would consider seeking out a pharmacist to receive point-of-care screenings, but only half were aware that a pharmacist is capable of conducting these screenings. All felt that pharmacists are a reliable source of general health information and medication related needs, regardless of the patients' education level or household income.

Conclusion: With the shortage of primary care providers, expansion of the scope of pharmaceutical practice is necessary. Although the public may not fully understand pharmacists' scope of practice, they are comfortable with pharmacists' knowledge related to general health needs outside of medications. The reported public comfort and trust of pharmacist knowledge and skills justify expanding the scope of pharmaceutical practice.

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Introduction

Pharmacists are widely considered one of the most accessible health care team members to the public, and pharmacy has traditionally been known as one of the most trustworthy healthcare professions in the United States.¹ Unfortunately, pharmacy is also one of the most misunderstood professions and is still widely considered a goods-based service that is largely focused on dispensing medication.² Public awareness that pharmacy is shifting to a clinically-based service is commonly unknown, and the community often does not understand the expanding roles of pharmacists in multiple practice settings, which may hinder development towards the expansion of pharmacy practice.

Inaccurate perceptions of the role of the pharmacist held by a community can be a barrier to patients who may benefit from accessing a pharmacist for medication or health-related questions. Current models of community pharmacy practice may project the pharmacist as too busy to talk with the patient. The development of Comprehensive Medication Reviews (CMR) through Medication Therapy Management (MTM) services, a service in which a patient can have dedicated time to speak with a pharmacist about their medication needs or inquire about questions regarding their diagnosed diseases, has expanded the traditional practice of pharmacy. Public perception of MTM services are largely positive, with most people feeling that pharmacists are in an ideal role to conduct CMR visits; however, patients do not have a high level of understanding of the full benefits of MTM services.³ Although it is has been suggested that screening events led by student pharmacists can aid in changing patient perceptions of pharmacy practice,⁴ patient perceptions of pharmacists and pharmacy students' expertise, as well as patient-reported comfort level with pharmacists, have yet to be explored. Additionally, the ways in which pharmacy students can have a positive impact on underserved communities is an expanding area of research which may also have implications for expansion of pharmacy practice.

Community outreach events serve as a valuable opportunity for student pharmacists to practice their clinical skills and communication techniques in a real-world setting.^{4,5} In such settings, students conduct CMR visits to determine if the patient has any questions related to their medications or their health in general health, and they ensure that the patient is taking the medication appropriately. Under the supervision of licensed pharmacists, these students are able to advocate for the profession of pharmacy while delivering an invaluable service to a community that in many cases does not have a high level of contact with the health care system.⁵ Student-led health fair screening events serve as an ideal environment to gauge patients' interest in seeking out pharmacy-led health management. This is a relatively new area of research that focuses on patients' perceptions of pharmacists' role in the health care team, and one that presents an opportunity to determine how the profession of pharmacy might best engage the public to improve utilization of pharmacy services.

The students of the University of Minnesota College of Pharmacy in Duluth conduct various health fair screening events around the surrounding areas and focus on low-income patients who typically do not have consistent contact with health care services.⁵ Those who attend health screenings are predominantly Caucasians, over the age of 40, and typically from the Duluth or surrounding areas; participants have a wide variety of reported medication utilization patterns, and many report that they do not take prescribed medications. Patients that attend health fairs screenings that have laboratory levels suggesting the need for intervention are then referred to primary care providers to address potentially untreated conditions.⁵ Patients that attend screening events are also welcomed to return to future events to help monitor chronic and newfound disease states.

A problematic theme that has recurred over the past ten years at hundreds of screening events in the region was the observation that many of the patient participants incorrectly believed that the screenings were being conducted by medical or nursing students, and often expressed great surprise that pharmacy students were administering and evaluating the screenings. This led pharmacy faculty and students to question whether other colleges of pharmacy across the nation had similar observations surrounding the perception of the pharmacists' role in the health care team.

A review of existing literature queried provider perceptions of pharmacists' roles and any of the research that focused on patient perceptions of pharmacists in the United States. One identified study, written by Begley et al.,⁶ describes a pharmacy school's experience with educational sessions that were coordinated by Creighton University pharmacy students. In this study, elementary children were educated on various health professions; by the end of these sessions, the children's knowledge of the profession of pharmacy increased by 52%, demonstrating the potential impact pharmacy students can have on the public's view of pharmacists. A report written by Lavine⁷ describes a health fair organized by students in the underserved Appalachian region in the state of Virginia, in which 1300 volunteers assisted more than 3500 patients. Through this event, professional students learned to assist patients with low health literacy and low medication adherence. In their work, Lavine and Begley et al.⁷ further demonstrate the positive impact that professional students can have on an underserved community.

Dillon and Sternas,⁸ in their manuscript entitled "Designing a successful health fair to promote individual, family, and community health", outline a clear goal for a community health fair: "to arouse awareness about health and to peak interest of the community members into improving their health." Dillon and Sternas⁸ also describe how such events can play a role in the expansion of the nursing profession in the health care field, which parallels the potential expansion these health fairs might offer the profession of pharmacy.

A study that assessed MTM services provided by pharmacy students on their community pharmacy Advanced Pharmacy Practice Experience (APPE) rotation at Western University of Health Sciences College of Pharmacy in Pomona, California found that 54% of patients reported that they discussed the pharmacy students' drug therapy recommendations with their physicians and that 75% of physicians adopted the students' recommendations.⁹ This study also highlighted the fact that 88% of patients receiving MTM thought the experience was valuable.⁹ Of note, 35% of the patients who completed surveys in this pilot study reported being unaware if MTM was a covered benefit provided by their insurance coverage.⁹ Hermansen and colleagues¹⁰ also found that patient responses regarding interaction with student pharmacists on clinical rotations were favorable. In this study, patients reported that they

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