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Research Paper

The future of weight management in pharmacy education – Perspectives of new generation pharmacists

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Over recent years, the profession of pharmacy has transitioned towards providing more individualised patient care services. In this context, community pharmacy has proven to be an excellent facilitator for weight management programs. However, education on weight management in pharmacy undergraduate curricula is often lacking. The perspectives of early career pharmacists on their perceived role in weight management services and their associated educational needs can inform curricula review.

Methods: In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 final year pharmacy students of The University of Sydney and five early career pharmacists from the greater Sydney, Australia area. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed for themes emerging.

Results: Participants were positive about their perceived role in providing weight management services. They regarded a program not based on commercial products as most suitable for pharmacy-delivered weight management services. However, some barriers were identified, such as lack of training and communication skills related to weight management. Participants requested more educational resources to ensure the delivery of high quality weight management services.

Discussion: Methods to enhance (future) pharmacists' knowledge of weight management services could include case-based learning, enhancement of communication skills, and the development of suitable guidelines.

Conclusions: Participants perceived a clear role for themselves in providing weight management services in community pharmacies. However, the current educational system does not meet their requirements to prepare them for this role. A hands-on approach in education on weight management and appropriate communication skills should be introduced in pharmacy curricula to ensure future pharmacists are well prepared to deliver weight management services.

Introduction

Overweight and obesity are a major public health burden worldwide. In 2014, 39% of the world population over the age of 18 was overweight and 13% was obese.¹ According to the 2014–15 Australian Health Survey,² 63.4% of Australian adults were overweight or obese. Not only does this have a negative impact on individual health, it comes at high costs for society.³

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Community pharmacies are accessible primary healthcare facilities with extensive outreach and are well positioned to help address the problem of weight management in the community setting. Contemporarily as well, the role of pharmacists is gradually evolving from solely dispensing medicine, to delivering personalised patient-centred care to consumers. Pharmacy students' perspectives on their future careers are changing accordingly. Studies have demonstrated that pharmacy students are keen to develop their role in patient-centred care and are motivated to utilise their training and expert knowledge to take on new roles, such as pharmacist-delivered weight management services.^{4,5}

These changing trends have caused leading institutions including a Lancet Commission,⁶ the International Pharmaceutical Federation (FIP),⁷ and the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE)⁸ to call for reforms in pharmacy education. In an attempt to reform some pharmacy curricula at American universities, courses on nutrition and lifestyle counselling were trialed.^{9,10} These courses improved knowledge about some aspects of weight management, yet students still felt they should be better prepared for lifestyle modification counselling.^{9,10}

Pharmacist-provided services such as lipid profile and blood pressure monitoring have demonstrated favourable effects on therapeutic outcomes of patients compared to services by other healthcare providers.¹¹ Weight management services initiated in pharmacies in the United Kingdom (UK) and pilot studies in Australia have also proved successful.¹²⁻¹⁴ However, little is known about how or whether these professional service developments have been incorporated into pharmacy curricula.

Training in weight management service provision was trialed in the pharmacy curriculum at The University of Sydney in 2015; resulting in significant increases in students' Obesity Risk Knowledge (ORK) scores and self-confidence in weight management skills, but follow-up applied knowledge and skills were not measured.¹⁵ Results from studies in some countries have suggested that, although attitudes of pharmacists towards initiating weight management services in pharmacy were affirmative, further training was requested.^{12,16} Future generation pharmacists are regarded as the "agents of change" in the pharmacy profession,¹⁵ thus gaining insight into the roles early career pharmacists see for themselves and their needs in providing weight management services, can provide insight into what undergraduate curricula reforms need to be introduced to support implementation of such services in practice. Therefore, we sought the opinion of new generation pharmacists on this topic.

This study aimed to explore perspectives of graduate pharmacy students and early career pharmacists on their future role and educational needs in implementing weight management services in pharmacies.

Methods

This study was approved by the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee [2016/773]. Qualitative research in the form of conducting semi-structured interviews was considered a suitable method to perform an in-depth needs analysis.

Approximately 70 final year bachelor of pharmacy students at the University of Sydney, Faculty of Pharmacy were invited to participate in the study via announcements made at lectures, tutorials, and an online invitation on a faculty learning platform. These students had attended baseline training in weight management and motivational interviewing as part of their final-year education and would have also attended several weeks of experiential learning in community pharmacies to gain hands-on experience in the practice of pharmacy. Additionally, a convenience sample of 10 early-career pharmacists (considered eligible if graduated < 10 years ago, including recent graduates still undergoing experiential internships) were sent an invitation to their alumni e-mail address. Once recruited, participants were issued a participant information statement (PIS) and asked to sign a consent form (CF). Participants were reimbursed with a shopping voucher valued AU\$20.

Data collection

The interviews were conducted either face-to-face on The University of Sydney grounds or over the phone. The interview protocol comprised of the following four main sections: (1) inquiry about the participant's general opinion about initiating a weight-management service in their (future) pharmacy; (2) exploring the participant's perceived (future) role in weight-management in pharmacy; (3) inquiry about the participant's perceived needs for implementation of a weight-management service; and (4) their general opinion or advice on weight-management in pharmacy to share with fellow (future) pharmacists. Interviews continued until "saturation" – meaning no new information could be identified. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Transcripts were coded using NVivo 11 software and thematically analysed. The coding was initially conducted by one researcher and themes were identified using an iterative process. Other members of the research team coded separately. For consistency and quality control, themes were then discussed in-depth and verified at several team meetings until consensus was reached.

Results

Interviews were conducted around Sydney, New South Wales, Australia throughout October 2016. Interviews were conducted with 20 pharmacy undergraduates and five early-career pharmacists [18 female, seven male]. Participating pharmacy students had at least several weeks of working experience in community pharmacy. Three of the early-career pharmacists were working full-time as registered community pharmacists and two were pre-registration interns. The data collected from both students and early-career pharmacists were almost identical, we therefore report them in an amalgamated data analysis.

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