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Research Note

Female pharmacists' career perceptions in Saudi Arabia: A survey at an academic center in Jeddah

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This study aimed to describe existing patterns of female pharmacy students' perceptions and their expectations regarding employment, job sectors, salaries, difficulties, and burdens, and to understand students' long-term prospects for employment in the pharmaceutical sector. The second objective was to assess students' perceptions of their careers in the short- and long-term.

Methods: This prospective survey was conducted on female pharmacy students at King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah from January 12, 2013 through January 21, 2013. The survey instrument was distributed online using Survey Monkey and was designed to assess students' opinions regarding employment in pharmacy.

Results: A total of 108 students responded to the surveyed. Approximately half reported that they would prefer to work in the government sector (50.9%), followed by the academic field (19.4%). Community pharmacies were underrepresented in the responses. Students' working durations, their preferred working shifts, and their 10-year prospects differed significantly from what was expected ($p < 0.001$). Similarly, students' preferences to work specific shifts ($p < 0.001$) and their long-term prospects ($p < 0.001$) were significantly different from what was expected. Participants perceived community and private pharmacies as the least rewarding in terms of remuneration. Approximately 61.1% of the participants perceived salaries at private hospitals to range between \$1865 and \$2397/month ($p < 0.001$).

Conclusion: Female graduates anticipate challenges in the pharmacy workforce, especially in the pharmaceutical sector. Lack of training, job stability, as well as religious and cultural constraints appeared to influence female graduate's decision to join a particular sector in the pharmacy field.

Introduction

Patient-focused education constitutes an important part of pharmacy education in developed countries such as the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK). However, many undergraduate pharmacy programs in developing nations are still dominated by traditional pharmaceutical sciences and pharmacy graduates are hardly trained to apply their knowledge to patient care.¹ Saudi Arabia has strived to expand the part played by pharmacists in the domain of pharmacy practice, and with the rapid growth of the pharmaceutical and clinical sectors, there is a growing need for highly-skilled pharmacy professionals who can work in the clinical and industrial setting.²

To practice pharmacy in Saudi Arabia, either a bachelor of pharmacy (BScPharm) or a doctor of pharmacy (PharmD) must be

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obtained. Choices for master's degree programs in pharmacy are limited in Saudi Arabia, as these programs are only offered by two government universities: King Saud University in Riyadh and King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah.^{2,3} The curricula for the BScPharm and PharmD programs share courses during the first four years, and students obtaining a BScPharm are required to study for one more year, while those wishing to obtain a PharmD are required to study for two more years.² The PharmD curriculum is continuously revised and monitored by Saudi health education experts to ensure that graduates from pharmacy schools are at the same level as those graduating from pharmacy schools in the US.⁴ Given that this is still a work in progress, holders of a BScPharm are allowed to practice pharmacy in Saudi Arabia. Despite efforts to improve pharmacy education in Saudi Arabia, the country is still suffering from a shortage of qualified Saudi pharmacists, especially in the pharmaceutical sector.⁵ The problem is compounded by the fact that most Saudi pharmacy graduates opt to work in the hospital pharmacy sector where services are progressive and income prospects are higher for clinical pharmacists.⁶ Furthermore, female pharmacists are not permitted to work in community pharmacies according to Saudi laws.⁷ In addition, most pharmacy programs in Saudi Arabia are clinically oriented and there is no specific program that trains pharmacists for a career in the pharmaceutical sector.⁷ Pharmaceutical companies therefore have the option of training their employees to improve their skills and make them qualified for the job.

In 2006, an estimated 34% of the Saudi pharmacy workforce (n = 8548) was female⁸; by 2011, females comprised 40% of the Saudi pharmacy workforce (n = 14,471).⁹ A similar trend has been observed in the international pharmacy workforce.^{10,11} In fact, reports^{12–15} show that other medical and paramedical professions are gradually attracting higher proportions of qualified female workers into their ranks. This trend undoubtedly reflects a general change of societal norms where female employment is concerned. In the US, for example, women comprised 60% of 6956 students who obtained their first professional degree in pharmacy during the academic year 1989–1990. The proportion of female graduates increased to 67% in the academic year 2003–2004.¹⁶ In the UK, concerns have been raised about the possibility of females having a stronger tendency to work part-time or leave their profession that could potentially lead to a shortage of pharmacists.¹⁵

In Saudi Arabia, female pharmacists have been able to achieve a breakthrough in joining the workforce, especially in the hospital pharmacy sector, where the total number of female pharmacists grew from 655 in 2006 to 1401 in 2013¹⁷; however, in the pharmaceutical sector, the challenges for women to have a career are more prominent and a prospective study is required to identify the factors that hinder female pharmacists from thriving in this sector. Moreover, female workers are more hesitant to build a career in the private pharmaceutical market, that includes pharmaceutical factories, community pharmacies, and pharmaceutical companies (distribution and scientific offices) owing to religious and cultural norms.¹⁸ Indeed, in Saudi society, women must have a specific attire (long sleeves, long dress, and hair covered with a veil),¹⁹ they cannot drive cars, they are not allowed to shake hands with unrelated persons of the opposite gender, and they cannot mingle with male colleagues.²⁰ Such cultural norms greatly impact the way women decide to pursue a career within a particular sector.

Only one study explored Saudi pharmacy students' readiness to build strong careers in the pharmaceutical industry²¹ and to date none has investigated preferred specialties and post-graduation career paths among Saudi female pharmacy graduates. The aim of this study was to describe existing patterns of female pharmacy graduate students' perceptions and their expectations regarding employment, job sectors, salaries, difficulties, and burdens, and to understand students' long-term prospects for employment in the pharmaceutical sector (companies and factories). The second objective was to assess graduates' perceptions of their careers in the short- and long-term.

Methods

Design and setting

This prospective survey targeted female pharmacy students at King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah. King Abdulaziz University, which is listed as one of top 500 universities in the world, established the first PharmD program in Saudi Arabia in 2001.²² Participant recruitment for this study was open from January 12, 2013 until January 21, 2013.

Ethical considerations

The survey was developed in consultation with the Research Ethics Committee at King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah.

Data collection

Students received a direct invitation to take part in the survey through text messages and social media posts and were informed that participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. Students were reminded during lectures on two different occasions and once through text message and social media. The authors discussed details of the study with students and fresh graduates to encourage participation; they also discussed the relevance of the study and how the results could assist female students in better understanding their career opportunities.

A total of 167 female pharmacy students were enrolled at King Abdulaziz University during the 2013–2014 academic year. Of these, 50 were fifth-year students, 63 were sixth-year students, and 54 were new graduates (one year or less). A total of 108 respondents completed the survey, representing an overall response rate of 64.7%.

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