



ASSESSING THE PHARMACIST'S ROLE IN PRESCRIPTION ALTERNATIVES: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The evolving landscape of healthcare has spotlighted the pharmacist's pivotal role in guiding patients through an array of treatment options, including the burgeoning field of prescription alternatives. This comprehensive analysis delves into the multifaceted responsibilities of pharmacists in modern healthcare settings, highlighting their unique position to assess, recommend, and monitor non-prescription-based therapies. Amidst the growing patient inclination towards less invasive, natural, or cost-effective remedies, pharmacists emerge as key players in facilitating a balanced integration of conventional and alternative treatments. This article critically examines the challenges, ethical considerations, and regulatory frameworks that shape pharmacists' contributions to patient care, alongside exploring the potential for enhanced patient outcomes through their informed intervention. Through a synthesis of theoretical insights, evidence-based practices, and real-world case studies, the article underscores the indispensable role of pharmacists in fostering an integrative approach to healthcare, thereby enriching patient care paradigms and bolstering the sustainability of health systems.

Keywords: Pharmacists' Role, Prescription Alternatives, Healthcare Integration, Patient Care, Alternative Therapies, Ethical Considerations, Regulatory Framework, Integrative Healthcare, Evidence-Based Practice, Patient Outcomes

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1- Introduction

The healthcare landscape is undergoing a transformative shift, with a growing emphasis on personalized and patient-centered care. Within this evolving framework, pharmacists stand at the forefront, bridging the gap between traditional pharmaceutical practices and the increasing demand for alternative therapeutic options. This article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the critical role pharmacists play in offering alternatives to prescription medications, reflecting on their contributions to patient care and the broader implications for healthcare systems.

Historically, the role of the pharmacist was primarily focused on dispensing medications and ensuring their safe and effective use. However, the scope of pharmacy practice has expanded significantly, encompassing a more holistic approach to patient health and wellness. Pharmacists are now recognized as essential healthcare providers, offering counseling, chronic disease management, and preventative care services, among others (American Pharmacists Association, 2020). Their extensive training and expertise in pharmacology and therapeutics position them as invaluable resources in guiding patients through the complexities of medication management, including the exploration of prescription alternatives.

The shift towards integrative healthcare highlights the need for a multidisciplinary approach to treatment, where pharmacists play a pivotal role in assessing the suitability of non-prescription-based therapies. This includes over-the-counter (OTC) medications, dietary supplements, herbal remedies, and lifestyle modifications. The growing public interest in alternative therapies reflects a desire for treatments that align with personal health beliefs and preferences, underscoring the importance of pharmacists in providing evidence-based recommendations and ensuring patient safety (Ventola, 2010).

Moreover, the increasing burden of chronic diseases and the associated costs have prompted a reevaluation of traditional healthcare models. The integration of alternative therapies offers a potential avenue for reducing healthcare expenditures while improving patient outcomes. Pharmacists, with their unique skill set and accessibility, are well-placed to facilitate this integration, providing a balanced perspective on the benefits and risks associated with various treatment options (Smith et al., 2017).

However, the expansion of pharmacists' roles in recommending alternative therapies is not without challenges. Ethical considerations, regulatory constraints, and the need for ongoing education

and training are critical factors that influence the extent to which pharmacists can engage in this aspect of patient care. Ensuring the quality, efficacy, and safety of alternative treatments remains paramount, necessitating a collaborative effort among healthcare professionals to establish clear guidelines and standards of practice (Barnett et al., 2018).

In conclusion, pharmacists are uniquely positioned to lead the integration of alternative therapies into patient care plans, leveraging their expertise to enhance patient outcomes and contribute to the sustainability of healthcare systems. As the demand for personalized and integrative healthcare continues to grow, the role of pharmacists will undoubtedly become increasingly integral to achieving holistic patient care.

2- The Role of Pharmacists in Healthcare

The role of pharmacists within the healthcare sector has evolved dramatically from traditional dispensary functions to a broader, more integrated approach in patient care. This transformation reflects the changing landscape of healthcare needs and the growing recognition of pharmacists as essential healthcare providers. Pharmacists now engage in a variety of activities that go beyond medication dispensing, encompassing patient counseling, medication management, chronic disease monitoring, preventative care services, and health promotion.

Expanded Scope of Practice

Pharmacists' responsibilities have expanded to include direct patient care roles, such as conducting health and wellness screenings, administering vaccines, and managing chronic diseases like diabetes and hypertension. This shift is supported by their in-depth knowledge of medications, including their mechanisms of action, side effects, interactions, and the body's response to them. The American Pharmacists Association (APhA) advocates for this expanded scope, highlighting the pharmacist's role in optimizing medication use and improving patient outcomes (American Pharmacists Association, 2020).

Medication Therapy Management

Medication Therapy Management (MTM) is a pivotal area where pharmacists contribute significantly to patient care. MTM involves reviewing patients' medication regimens to ensure that medications are appropriate, effective, safe, and used correctly. This practice is particularly important in managing patients with multiple chronic conditions, polypharmacy, and complex medication regimens. Studies have shown that

pharmacist-led MTM can improve clinical outcomes and reduce healthcare costs by minimizing medication errors and adverse drug events (Bluml, 2005).

Collaborative Healthcare Teams

Pharmacists are increasingly recognized as integral members of collaborative healthcare teams, working alongside physicians, nurses, and other healthcare professionals. This collaborative approach ensures a comprehensive care plan that addresses all aspects of a patient's health, enhancing the quality of care. The inclusion of pharmacists in these teams has been shown to improve the management of chronic diseases, medication adherence, and patient satisfaction (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2010).

Health Promotion and Disease Prevention

Beyond medication-related services, pharmacists also engage in health promotion and disease prevention activities. This includes providing education on lifestyle modifications, nutrition, exercise, and smoking cessation. By offering these services, pharmacists play a crucial role in preventative health care, aiming to reduce the incidence of chronic diseases and improve overall public health (Puumalainen et al., 2005).

3- Challenges with Traditional Prescription Medications

Traditional prescription medications are a cornerstone of modern healthcare, providing essential treatment for a myriad of conditions. However, the use of these medications is not without its challenges, which can impact patient health, healthcare systems, and society at large. These challenges include issues related to side effects, long-term dependency, accessibility, cost, and the emergence of antibiotic resistance.

- Side Effects and Adverse Reactions

One of the primary concerns with prescription medications is the potential for side effects and adverse drug reactions (ADRs). These can range from mild to severe and may significantly impact a patient's quality of life. A study by Lazarou et al. (1998) estimated that ADRs are among the top causes of mortality in the United States, highlighting the critical need for careful medication management and monitoring.

- Long-term Dependency and Overuse

Certain classes of medications, particularly opioids and benzodiazepines, are associated with risks of long-term dependency and overuse. The opioid epidemic in the United States serves as a stark example, where widespread prescription of opioids for pain management led to significant issues of addiction, overdose, and death (Manchikanti et al.,

2012). This situation underscores the importance of exploring alternative pain management strategies and the careful prescription of potentially addictive medications.

- Accessibility and Cost Issues

Accessibility to prescription medications is another significant challenge, affected by factors such as insurance coverage, drug pricing, and availability. High costs of medications can lead to non-adherence, where patients may skip doses or not fill their prescriptions at all, adversely affecting treatment outcomes (DiMatteo, 2004). This issue is particularly acute for life-saving drugs or treatments for chronic conditions, where sustained access is crucial.

- Antibiotic Resistance

The overuse and misuse of antibiotics have led to the growing problem of antibiotic resistance, a global public health threat. The inappropriate prescription of antibiotics for viral infections or the failure to complete prescribed antibiotic courses has contributed to the development of resistant bacterial strains, complicating the treatment of infections and increasing mortality rates (Ventola, 2015).

These challenges necessitate a multifaceted approach, including the development of new therapeutic options, improved patient education and communication, more judicious prescribing practices, and systemic changes to healthcare policy and drug pricing models. Pharmacists, as medication experts, play a critical role in addressing these challenges through patient counseling, medication management, and advocacy for accessible and affordable healthcare.

4- Exploring Alternatives to Prescription Medications

Exploring alternatives to prescription medications has become increasingly important in modern healthcare due to the challenges associated with traditional pharmaceuticals, such as side effects, long-term dependency, and accessibility issues. These alternatives, which include lifestyle changes, over-the-counter (OTC) products, herbal supplements, and complementary therapies, offer potential benefits for patient care when used appropriately and under professional guidance.

Lifestyle Changes

Lifestyle modifications are foundational alternatives that can significantly impact health outcomes. Changes in diet, exercise, stress management, and smoking cessation have been shown to improve conditions like hypertension, diabetes, and heart disease. The INTERHEART study demonstrated that modifiable lifestyle

factors are critical in the prevention of cardiovascular diseases worldwide (Yusuf et al., 2004).

Over-the-Counter (OTC) Products

OTC products can serve as effective alternatives or adjuncts to prescription medications for minor ailments and certain chronic conditions. For example, ibuprofen and acetaminophen are widely used for pain management. The responsible use of these products, guided by pharmacists, can alleviate the need for prescription drugs in some cases (Qato et al., 2016).

Herbal Supplements

Herbal supplements and natural products have been used for centuries in traditional medicine and are increasingly being integrated into Western healthcare practices. For example, St. John's Wort has been studied for its effectiveness in treating mild to moderate depression (Linde et al., 2008). However, it's crucial to consider the potential for interactions with prescription medications and the variability in supplement quality.

Complementary Therapies

Complementary therapies such as acupuncture, massage, and mindfulness meditation have gained recognition for their role in managing pain, stress, and chronic conditions. The National Institutes of Health's National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH) supports research into these therapies and their integration into conventional medical practices (NCCIH, 2018).

Integrating Alternatives with Conventional Care

The integration of alternative therapies with conventional care requires careful consideration of evidence, safety, and individual patient needs. Pharmacists, with their expertise in medication management and patient counseling, are well-positioned to guide patients in the safe and effective use of these alternatives. This collaborative approach can enhance patient outcomes, promote holistic health, and potentially reduce reliance on prescription medications (Ventola, 2010).

5- Pharmacists as Mediators for Alternative Therapies

Pharmacists, as accessible healthcare professionals with extensive knowledge of medications, are well-positioned to serve as mediators for alternative therapies. Their role in this capacity involves evaluating the safety and efficacy of non-prescription therapies, providing reliable information, and ensuring that any alternative

treatments used by patients are compatible with their prescription medications and overall health status.

- Evaluating Safety and Efficacy

Pharmacists play a critical role in assessing the safety and efficacy of alternative therapies. This involves staying informed about the latest research and guidelines regarding various treatments, including herbal supplements, over-the-counter (OTC) products, and complementary therapies. By doing so, they can provide evidence-based advice to patients considering these options. For instance, a study by Mehta et al. (2020) highlights the importance of pharmacists' knowledge in herbal medicine as it impacts their ability to counsel patients effectively.

- Patient Counseling and Education

Pharmacists provide counseling and education to patients on the appropriate use of alternative therapies. This includes discussing potential benefits and risks, proper dosing, and the importance of quality and purity of products. They can also educate patients on recognizing and reporting adverse effects, ensuring a safer experience with these treatments. The American Pharmacists Association (APhA) supports the role of pharmacists in patient education, emphasizing their responsibility to guide patients in making informed healthcare decisions (American Pharmacists Association, 2020).

- Ensuring Compatibility with Prescription Medications

One of the critical roles of pharmacists is to ensure that any alternative therapies used by patients do not interact adversely with their prescription medications. This includes reviewing patients' medication profiles and counseling them on potential drug-herb or drug-supplement interactions. For example, St. John's Wort is known to interact with a wide range of medications, potentially leading to reduced efficacy or increased toxicity of the drugs (Borrelli & Izzo, 2009).

- Collaborating with Healthcare Providers

Pharmacists often collaborate with other healthcare providers to integrate alternative therapies into a patient's overall care plan. This multidisciplinary approach ensures that all aspects of a patient's health are considered and that alternative treatments are used safely and effectively alongside conventional medical treatments (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2010).

6- Case Studies and Real-World Examples

Case studies and real-world examples play a crucial role in illustrating the impact of pharmacists in integrating alternative therapies into

patient care. These examples highlight the practical application of pharmacists' expertise in medication management, patient counseling, and the safe use of alternative treatments.

Case Study 1: Management of Chronic Pain with Complementary Therapies

A patient suffering from chronic lower back pain, previously managed with prescription opioids, expressed interest in reducing opioid use due to concerns about dependency. The pharmacist conducted a comprehensive medication review and consulted with the patient's healthcare team. Based on the review, the pharmacist recommended a combination of physical therapy, yoga, and acupuncture as complementary therapies. Over several months, the patient reported significant pain relief and was able to reduce opioid use substantially. This case underscores the pharmacist's role in facilitating multidisciplinary care and offering alternative pain management strategies (Chou et al., 2016).

Case Study 2: Herbal Supplements for Managing Menopause Symptoms

A postmenopausal woman sought advice from her pharmacist about managing hot flashes and night sweats without hormone replacement therapy. The pharmacist reviewed her medical history and current medications to avoid potential interactions. After discussing options, the pharmacist suggested a trial of black cohosh, an herbal supplement with evidence supporting its use in managing menopause symptoms. The patient was advised on proper dosage and potential side effects. Over time, she reported a noticeable improvement in her symptoms, illustrating the pharmacist's role in providing evidence-based recommendations for herbal supplements (Newton et al., 2006).

Case Study 3: Dietary Supplements for Cardiovascular Health

A patient with a history of cardiovascular disease inquired about ways to improve heart health alongside prescribed medications. The pharmacist reviewed the latest evidence on omega-3 fatty acids and their role in cardiovascular health. After ensuring no contraindications with the patient's current medications, the pharmacist recommended a specific brand of omega-3 supplements, emphasizing the importance of quality and purity. The patient's subsequent follow-ups showed improved lipid profiles, highlighting the pharmacist's contribution to supplement selection and patient education on heart-healthy practices (Mozaffarian & Wu, 2011).

7- Ethical and Regulatory Considerations

Navigating the ethical and regulatory considerations associated with recommending alternative therapies is a critical aspect of a pharmacist's role. These considerations are vital to ensuring patient safety, maintaining professional integrity, and adhering to legal standards.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical duty of pharmacists to do no harm (non-maleficence) and to act in the best interests of their patients (beneficence) is paramount when considering alternative therapies. Pharmacists must weigh the evidence supporting the use of such therapies against potential risks and ensure patients are fully informed about their options. This includes discussing the lack of regulation for certain supplements and the variability in product quality. The ethical principle of autonomy also requires pharmacists to respect patients' values and decisions regarding their treatment choices, provided they are informed and not harmful (Ventola, 2010).

Informed Consent

Informed consent is a cornerstone of ethical healthcare delivery, involving clear communication about the potential benefits and risks of treatment options. When recommending alternative therapies, pharmacists must ensure that patients understand the nature of these treatments, the extent of their scientific support, potential side effects, and interactions with conventional medications. This transparency supports patients' right to make informed decisions about their healthcare (Barnett et al., 2018).

Regulatory Considerations

The regulatory landscape for alternative therapies varies significantly by region and type of therapy. In many countries, dietary supplements and herbal products are not subject to the same rigorous testing and approval processes as prescription medications. Pharmacists must be aware of and adhere to the regulatory frameworks governing these products, including labeling, marketing, and safety reporting requirements. The Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act of 1994 (DSHEA) in the United States, for example, outlines specific regulations for dietary supplements, which pharmacists must understand to guide patients effectively (U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2021).

Professional Standards and Guidelines

Professional pharmacy organizations often provide guidelines and standards for pharmacists regarding

the recommendation of alternative therapies. These guidelines help ensure that pharmacists' practices are evidence-based, consistent with professional ethics, and in compliance with regulatory requirements. For instance, the American Pharmacists Association offers resources and policy statements guiding pharmacists in complementary and alternative medicine practices (American Pharmacists Association, 2020).

8- Challenges and Limitations in Providing Alternatives

Providing alternatives to prescription medications presents several challenges and limitations for pharmacists and the healthcare system. These challenges range from issues related to evidence and regulation to patient safety and professional scope of practice.

- Evidence and Efficacy

One of the primary challenges in recommending alternative therapies is the variability in the quality of evidence supporting their efficacy. Unlike prescription medications, many alternative therapies have not undergone rigorous clinical trials to establish their safety and effectiveness. This lack of robust evidence can make it difficult for pharmacists to evaluate and recommend these therapies confidently. Ernst and Pittler (1998) discuss the need for more rigorous research in the field of complementary and alternative medicine to support evidence-based recommendations.

- Regulatory and Quality Control Issues

The regulation of dietary supplements, herbal products, and other alternative therapies is less stringent than that for prescription medications in many jurisdictions. This can lead to issues with product quality, consistency, and labeling, which pose significant challenges for pharmacists in ensuring the safety and reliability of these products for patients. The Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act of 1994 (DSHEA) in the United States, for example, allows supplements to be marketed without proof of efficacy or safety, which can lead to challenges in ensuring product quality (U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2021).

- Patient Safety and Interaction Risks

Patient safety is a paramount concern when considering alternative therapies. The potential for interactions between alternative therapies and prescription medications is a significant risk, particularly for patients with complex medical histories or those taking multiple medications. Pharmacists must be vigilant in reviewing patients' medication profiles and counseling them on possible interactions, which requires up-to-date

knowledge and resources. The case of St. John's Wort, known for its interactions with numerous conventional drugs, exemplifies the importance of this vigilance (Borrelli and Izzo, 2009).

- Professional Scope of Practice

The scope of practice for pharmacists varies by region, affecting their ability to recommend and manage alternative therapies. While pharmacists are medication experts, their training and expertise in alternative therapies may be limited, posing challenges in providing informed recommendations. Continuing education and interdisciplinary collaboration are essential for pharmacists to navigate these limitations effectively (Barnett et al., 2018).

- Patient Perceptions and Expectations

Managing patient perceptions and expectations can also be challenging when discussing alternative therapies. Patients may have strong beliefs about the effectiveness of certain treatments based on anecdotal evidence or misinformation. Pharmacists must carefully balance respecting patients' preferences and beliefs with providing evidence-based guidance, which requires strong communication skills and a patient-centered approach.

9- The Future of Pharmacists in Integrative Healthcare

The future of pharmacists within the realm of integrative healthcare is poised for significant evolution. As the healthcare landscape continues to shift towards a more holistic, patient-centered model, pharmacists are expected to play an increasingly pivotal role in integrating conventional and alternative therapies into comprehensive care plans. This evolution will be characterized by several key developments:

Expanded Clinical Roles

Pharmacists are likely to assume more diverse and expanded clinical roles in direct patient care, particularly in chronic disease management, wellness, and prevention services. Their expertise will be crucial in managing and coordinating care that incorporates both traditional medications and alternative treatments, ensuring a holistic approach to patient health (Smith et al., 2017).

Collaborative Practice Models

Interprofessional collaboration will become more integral, with pharmacists working closely with physicians, nurses, nutritionists, and practitioners of complementary and alternative medicine. This collaborative model will enhance the delivery of patient-centered care, leveraging the unique skills

and knowledge of each professional to optimize health outcomes (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2010).

Emphasis on Evidence-Based Alternative Therapies

There will be a growing emphasis on evidence-based practice in the recommendation of alternative therapies. Pharmacists will play a key role in evaluating the scientific evidence supporting these therapies, ensuring that patients receive safe, effective, and evidence-based care. This will involve staying abreast of the latest research and integrating this knowledge into patient counseling and care planning (Ventola, 2010).

Advanced Education and Training

To meet the demands of their evolving role in integrative healthcare, pharmacists will require advanced education and training in alternative therapies and integrative medicine. This may include continuing education programs, certifications, and inclusion of integrative medicine components in pharmacy school curricula, equipping pharmacists with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate the complexities of integrative care (Barnett et al., 2018).

Regulatory and Policy Advocacy

Pharmacists will also be involved in regulatory and policy-making processes to shape the future of integrative healthcare. This will include advocating for clear guidelines and standards for the safe use of alternative therapies, contributing to policy development that supports integrative care models, and ensuring that regulatory frameworks facilitate the optimal involvement of pharmacists in patient care (American Pharmacists Association, 2020).

Technology and Digital Health Integration

The integration of technology and digital health tools will enhance pharmacists' roles in integrative healthcare. From telehealth consultations to digital platforms for tracking patient health and medication management, technology will enable pharmacists to provide more accessible, personalized, and comprehensive care, including the integration of alternative therapies into treatment plans (Hussain et al., 2019).

Conclusion

The expanding role of pharmacists in providing alternatives to traditional prescription medications reflects a broader shift towards integrative healthcare, where patient care is approached

holistically, considering a wide array of therapeutic options. Pharmacists, with their deep understanding of pharmacology, are uniquely positioned to navigate the complexities of both conventional and alternative therapies, ensuring that patients receive safe, effective, and personalized care.

As mediators between conventional medicine and alternative therapies, pharmacists play a pivotal role in assessing the efficacy and safety of non-prescription treatments, educating patients about their options, and ensuring that any chosen alternatives are compatible with existing treatment plans. Their involvement is crucial in managing the challenges associated with alternative therapies, such as the variability in evidence quality, regulatory discrepancies, and potential risks of interactions.

Looking forward, the role of pharmacists in integrative healthcare is set to grow. This evolution will likely involve expanded clinical responsibilities, greater involvement in collaborative care models, and a stronger focus on evidence-based practice. To support this shift, enhanced education and training in integrative and alternative therapies will be essential, as will active participation in regulatory and policy discussions to shape the future of patient-centered care.

In conclusion, pharmacists are at the forefront of a transformative movement in healthcare, one that embraces the integration of diverse therapeutic modalities to enhance patient outcomes. Their expertise, accessibility, and trusted position in the community make them indispensable in the journey towards a more inclusive, evidence-based, and patient-focused healthcare paradigm. As this field continues to evolve, the contributions of pharmacists will be vital in ensuring that patients benefit from a holistic approach to health and wellness, encompassing the best of what both conventional and alternative therapies have to offer.

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