

Community Pharmacists' Involvement with Substance Abusers, Alcoholics & Their Families

Media liaison committee Sedqa

Introduction

Most people visit the pharmacy to purchase medication. Customers ask for pharmacists for advice on the use of their medication and on the management of their condition, thereby giving them an opportunity to build a professional relationship. Those who have difficulties with substance abuse may be afraid that they will be identified and try to ensure anonymity as much as possible. This may be antagonistic to building a relationship with the person, however, clients tend to obtain their medication from the same pharmacy.

Many drug abusers are polydrug users and not only use illegal drugs, but also misuse drugs that could be bought over-the-counter with or without a prescription. They could abuse drugs that a relative has been prescribed for mental health conditions.

The drug abuser does everything in order to maintain his/her habit. Besides, many alcoholics have prescribed medication and this could be misused with alcohol. Overdoses still occur through the misuse of certain types of medication together with illegal drugs and alcohol.

Knowledge of signs and symptoms of drug addiction

The community pharmacist has to have a sound knowledge of the signs and symptoms shown by persons who use heroin, ecstasy, cocaine and cannabis and also alcohol. Signs and symptoms could include physical, psychological and social. Other evidence includes paraphernalia attached to substance abuse such as syringes, foil, etc. The community pharmacist should be able to differentiate between the signs and symptoms of different illegal drugs and

alcohol.

Substance abusers tend to purchase painkillers and other types of medication that could substitute illicit drugs. Usually, these could be bought over-the-counter without a prescription. Getting to know the names of the habitual medication asked for would contribute towards the identification of substance abusers. Besides, many are those who ask for medication that is used in the management of mental health, such as antidepressants, benzodiazepines etc. Ethically and legally it is the pharmacist's responsibility to ensure the appropriate use of the medication dispensed. Heroin or cocaine users generally go to health centres for a free supply of syringes, but individuals also buy them from the pharmacy. It would be sensible to investigate the use of such equipment when suspicion arises.

Services available in Malta and Gozo

Many professionals who encounter individuals with substance abuse or alcohol problems are not aware of the services available. Though the pharmacist may not have a deep relationship with his regular or occasional customer, he/she needs to be knowledgeable of the offered. It would be helpful to customers if they find literature available in the pharmacy, about drug abuse and its effect, and the services offered by Sedqa, Caritas, Oasi, AA, NA and other organisations to those who are facing alcohol or substance-related difficulties. Consequently, this could stimulate the customer's interest to ask for help. Publications could be left handy so that the general public could easily take copies without attracting attention. Drug abuse and alcohol related difficulties are more pronounced in certain areas than in others. Statistical knowledge as to the concentration of the drug addiction and alcohol related problems in the respective area would keep the pharmacist on the look out.

Confidentiality and Referral

The pharmacist-customer relationship provides an excellent opportunity for the client to initiate a conversation and express his worries.

Confidentiality encourages the client to open up and ask for further help. This may be difficult in a "shop-like" environment, open to the general public, therefore a private area/consultation room in the pharmacy is necessary for such an encounter. Since substance abusers and alcoholics may feel threatened if a pharmacist takes too much interest in their condition, this needs to be done in a non-judgmental and positive manner. Substance abusers often send their relatives to buy medication. Building a good relationship with these relatives could enable a first contact.

Many families suspect that their sons or daughters or their partners abuse drugs, but are not prepared to admit it. This contact enables them to reach out for help.

The pharmacist could also serve as a liaison between the customer and the doctors at Detox Outpatients or the community workers at Dar Gubbio in Sta. Venera. This liaison enables the customer to start receiving help. Thus it is important to note the three main channels of referral: Detox Outpatients, Community Services and for alcohol abusers, Dar Zerniq in Floriana. Many substance abusers or relatives being to receive help when the problem is relatively serious. To facilitate this liaison, it could be possible to offer a first appointment at the pharmacy. People are afraid to be identified and at times, when relatives, substance abusers or alcoholics are still in the denial phase, they could be reluctant to approach services. Drug abuse specialists could initiate contact through a first appointment, free of charge, at the pharmacy clinic. This contact would take the place of a home visit in such cases, enabling the customer to have a more attractive choice.

Sedqa has just launched an informative leaflet aimed at those professionals who may need to refer individuals with drug or alcohol related problems. Further basic information regarding substance abuse and the situations surrounding it are available through monthly seminars organised by the Prevention Division. ✱

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