

Working with the patient

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The pharmacist is the undisputed drug expert. Pharmacists possess an in depth knowledge of drug use, their therapeutic effects and undesired effects. The ever increasing amount of medicines available both through doctor's prescription and those directly available to the consumer are providing the possibility of better care for the patient. However, the potential for drug-related morbidity is also increasing.

Pharmacists' active intervention to ensure appropriate drug use is therefore imperative. In order to achieve this goal, pharmacists need to form a relationship both with the prescribers and with the consumers of medicines.

Pharmacists work exceptionally well in a team with other healthcare professionals for the benefit of the patient. The perception of other healthcare professionals as to what the pharmacist 'can do' or 'should do' may, at first, prove to be a barrier to pharmacists' acceptance by the team. However, once in the team, it becomes evident that the pharmacist's in depth knowledge of drugs makes

him/her indispensable for the optimum management of the patient. The formation of this type of relationship is facilitated by the fact that as healthcare professionals both pharmacists and doctors 'speak the same language' thus communication barriers are likely to be overcome.

Establishing a relationship/partnership with the patient/consumer of medicines is necessary to ensure the safe and effective use of drugs. Patients have a desire to be involved in and informed about their own health and about the medicines they use. It is rather disappointing that although pharmacists are the professionals with the best knowledge

about drugs, studies show that pharmacists are rarely the primary source of drug information for the patient/medicine consumer.

The first point to consider is whether the pharmacist can communicate with patients to transfer the desired information. Can pharmacists counsel patients about their medicines? Do pharmacists possess the appropriate skills to do this? Are these skills that simply develop over time, with experience or do they need to be taught?

Prof. Marja Airaksinen and her team have been working on these issues for the past ten years. Her paper entitled 'The role of communication skills in developing patient-centered practice in community pharmacies' published in this edition of the *Chronic*ill*, highlights problems associated with pharmacists' communication skills.

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It seems that while patients give a clear indication that they would like more information about their medication, pharmacists are unable to communicate this information. While pharmacists have grown accustomed to asking patients questions regarding the use of medicines they do not seem altogether comfortable with answering their questions.

From this and other work published by Prof. Airaksinen and her team, it is evident that pharmacists and undergraduate pharmacy students need appropriate training in communication skills.

The teaching of communication skills to pharmacists needs to be

urgently addressed. Unless these skills are developed, pharmacists are unable to build a relationship with the patient and effectively communicate their knowledge of drugs. Working with the patient to form a collaborative relationship requires not only the willingness of both patient and pharmacist to form such a relationship, but also requires pharmacists to effectively tap into their reservoir of knowledge and truly deliver a professional counselling service.

The 13th International Social Pharmacy Workshop will serve as a forum for the exchange of resources in this field. Prof. Airaksinen will be

joined in Malta, by other experts, to network and enhance international cooperation. Also present at the meeting will be delegates from EuroPharm Forum from the World Health Organisation. EuroPharm Forum was responsible for the campaign 'Questions to ask about your medicines' which led to the identification of communication problems between pharmacists and patients.

I would like to take this opportunity to officially welcome all the delegates to The 13th International Social Pharmacy Workshop and wish everybody a memorable scientific and social experience.