

## Role of pharmacies and pharmacists

# Emerging horizons



Pharmacy is one unit of healthcare that connects everyone. One may hesitate to visit a doctor or hospital, but not a pharmacy. Whether it is information about which medicine to take for stomach ache, fever or diarrhoea, or merely an enquiry for a good doctor in the area, the first thought that comes to mind is to consult one's neighbourhood

pharmacist. The relationship shared between pharmacists and customers is changing, and it opens up new possibilities about the role of a pharmacist. Keeping an eye on this relationship, this article throws light on the changing role of pharmacists and the factors that influence this change.



### Rajendra Gupta

India is home to more than five-and-a-half lakh pharmacies and about 5.59 lakh pharmacists, according to the numbers registered with All India Organization of Chemists and Druggists (AIOCD). They are facing a tough scenario right now, due to competition from the trade, shrinking margins, increasing-stock keeping unit (SKUs), rentals and

awareness among patients and shortage of pharmacists.

Two-third pharmacies exist in the urban sector, while a third in rural areas. Over 70 per cent pharmacies are in five states, viz, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Karnataka and Punjab, which accounts for 30 per cent of India. The typical shop size of a pharmacy is between 110 and 300 sq ft, with or without air conditioning. However, it is unusual to find an air conditioner,

just like it is uncommon to find a pharmacist manning a pharmacy. It is clear that of the total number of pharmacists in the country, not all work for pharmacies. Almost 20 per cent go for higher studies, pharma companies or get into other jobs. Hence, one can be sure that all the pharmacies are not manned by pharmacists. Moreover, a lack of the regulatory staff leads to blatant violation of the FDA norms and thus, the consumers' interests are compromised. Substitution is rampant in 'B' class towns and there is no concept of patient counselling or adhering to good pharmacy practices (GPP).

### Paradigm shift

The pharmaceutical industry is undergoing a paradigm change like the modern retail pharmacy chains that made an appearance on the Indian landscape a few years ago. Currently, pharmacies sell anything and everything under the sun. It may be something as far flung as shoe polish or milk.... you name it and they sell it - if there is money to be made!

Today, about 20-pharmacy chains are operating through 3,000 outlets across the country and growing at a rate of 2-4 shops a day. Still, these are under 2 per cent of the total trade. Hence another trend that is not too far is when modern pharmacy chains would be ruling the trade - at least in the major towns across India. Even

the AIOCD is looking at 'corporatising' the trade.

Now-a-days, consumer awareness is on the rise and has substantially increased in the last 10 years. Contemporary consumers demand medicines to be stored under cool conditions (more than 35°C is not cool as per Pharmacopoeia). If this is not done then consumers will either shift their purchases to a GPP-compliant pharmacy or complain to the FDA about the violation of storage norms. This would ultimately lead to the closure of many non-compliant pharmacies.

Further, the scare of spurious and sub-standard drugs would drive consumers towards modern retail trade and this in itself would shift the business of 'Old timers' and 'Corner stores' to organised retail. All this spells trouble for smaller pharmacies.

### Collateral relationships

One has to consider the current medical practice scenario and patient behaviour in order to define the evolving role of pharmacists. As of now, the density of physicians per 1,000-population is 0.60, nurses 0.80, mid wives 0.47, dentists 0.06, hospital beds 0.70, while pharmacist is 0.56. Thus, India can be rightly classified under



the category of health professional shortage area (HPSA).

If one takes into account patient behaviour, according to one study done by *The Tribune-NCR* edition, of all patients who are prescribed medicines, one-third take the drugs as instructed, one-third comply partially, while one-third do not take it at all. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 50 per cent of the medicines prescribed are not taken at all.

There has been a shift from infectious diseases to chronic diseases. India has already become infamous for being the 'Diabetic capital' and is now poised to become the 'Cardio-vascular diseases capital' as well. Almost 60 per cent deaths occur due to chronic diseases. Hence, if chronic diseases are diagnosed at an early stage then these can be controlled by diet and lifestyle modifications. Moreover, a timely diagnosis is an important issue. For every one person diagnosed, there are nine who are not diagnosed.

Taking into account the shortage of doctors, nurses, hospital beds, poor patient-medication compliance, the prevalence & growth of chronic diseases and poor diagnostic approach to healthcare, the role of pharmacists & pharmacies not only becomes important but also indispensable.

### Defining roles

Pharmacists are the most trusted and easily accessible people for patients and are the first points of contact in the healthcare chain. The role of a pharmacist commences with the



community soon as he/she sets up the pharmacy. The first responsibility of any pharmacist is to create awareness about wellness. Another important duty is to help a potential patient get properly screened by the right doctor. However, just referring a patient to a good doctor is not enough - pharmacists should also help patients follow the therapy properly. The final role of pharmacists is to check with other members of the patient's family in order to increase awareness & acceptance for the illness and adopt preventive care.

After all, pharmacy is not about sales, but service, because the doctor has already affected the sale by writing the prescription. Pharmacy is all about servicing that prescription.

### Emerging horizons

New therapies are emerging to redefine the healthcare sector like stem cells, gene therapy, etc. The telemedicine network and service is expanding; home-based healthcare is fast catching-up; health supplements, ayurvedic & herbal medicines are increasing their user base and generic drugs awareness is growing rapidly.

One can now witness the logical progression from being 'Curative' to

'Preventive' to 'Predictive' care, and all this will require pharmacists to play a more proactive role.

The healthcare system is underfunded and overburdened when it comes to handling patients and following are the roles pharmacists can play here:

- ❖ Connect on a fortnightly basis in the community they operate in
- ❖ Create awareness drives about various illnesses associating with healthcare providers in the local areas
- ❖ Carry on immunisation drives and maintain vaccination charts
- ❖ Be a part of the remote monitoring network and offer instant health check-ups like body mass index, blood pressure check, sugar check with instant checking devices, ECG, spirometry, etc, at the pharmacy or patient's home. Technology today enables this to be carried out without much investment
- ❖ Maintain a list of referral doctors
- ❖ Form patient groups for chronic and geriatric patients
- ❖ Essentially inform all chronic patients about the dos and don'ts related to refilling prescriptions

Customers can be categorised into six classes and the pharmacy/ pharmacist has an important role to play for each:

**Healthy and uninterested:** These are the customers who can be provided with health tips.

**Healthy and interested:** These customers need continuous health tips and preventive screenings.


**Worried well:** These customers are hungry for disease-based information.

**Newly diagnosed:** These are the patients who need counselling, reminders, refills, follow-ups, etc.

**Just recovered:** These patients require continuous follow-ups, timely check up and scheduling of the doctor appointments.



**Chronically ill:** These patients need counselling, reminders, refills, tele-monitoring, scheduling doctor appointments and follow up. Hence, one can see that with the passage of time, the role of pharmacists is becoming more and more 'patient-centric' rather than 'prescription focussed'. Pharmacy has a lot to do and has to care beyond prescriptions. While the pharmacies and pharmacists are willing to do all this, it cannot take place without becoming IT-enabled and staying connected with patients. There are a number of web-based tools that are available for free and can be used to share not just valuable information but also free SMSs. Pharmacists themselves need continuous medical education and regular updates to stay alive professionally.

The old days of using computers as calculators to make bills have to give way to now being internet savvy and networked. The key to this lies in technology and automation. In essence, the roles of the pharmacies & pharmacists have to evolve from being mere dispensers of medicines to health advisors and a gateway to healthcare needs. 



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