

# Advocacy in pharmacy: Changing “what is” into “what should be”

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## Introduction

With the profession of pharmacy changing dramatically in recent years, it has become more and more apparent that pharmacists are being placed in the driver's seat when it comes to promoting new skills and services to patients. Not only have these changes begun to emphasize a less technical role for pharmacists, but they have also opened up many diverse opportunities for pharmacists willing to step outside their comfort zone. But the question that is being asked by many pharmacists is “How?” How do we keep patients happy and safe? How do we keep prescription volume high while working on new patient services? How do I show that I matter to the health care system?

The answer is a lot simpler than many people realize. In fact, it can be summed up in one key word: Advocacy!

Usually, when people think of professional advocacy, they think of large organizations with direct lines to government or policy makers as opposed to those front-line pharmacists who practise daily in a pharmacy setting. However, advocacy in its most basic form is simply promotion. But how can you influence the government and the continuing advancement of your profession by merely working at a local level? As Yvon Chouinard, founder of Patagonia, Inc., recently said in an interview, “Since corporations run the government, if you want to change the government, you have to change the corporations. If you want to change the corporations, change the consumers [patients].”<sup>1</sup>

Advocacy is promotion of your skills and education as a health care provider. And it is this

grassroots movement for change that will drive the profession forward.

## Current environment

The current public perception of a pharmacist typically entails a clean-cut person wearing a white coat while standing behind a counter dispensing medications. We are known as the “drug experts” of the world, but does this accurately represent the expanding scope of practice of our profession? Pharmacist depiction in the media is often an inaccurate representation. For example, a quick Google search of *pharmacy* or *pharmacist* generates results of medication errors, rising drug costs and countless images of pharmacists in the dispensary surrounded by medications, counting by fives. This perception is a widely accepted, albeit vastly outdated, view of the profession relative to the clinical services actually performed on a day-to-day basis. The ambiguity of the media portrayal of our professional role presents a massive opportunity to begin changing this perception. It is possible that patients have no idea what we do and so it is time we start letting them know. By advocating at the pharmacist-patient level, we could reverse this current trend and strongly push for the profession.

## Base to build upon

In order to continue moving the role of the pharmacist into the future, it is important that pharmacists advocate for their expanded scope of practice as health care providers. Research has proven that clinical services provided by pharmacists improve patient outcomes—the goal of all health care professionals. The vision of pharmacy in Canada is to provide “optimal

drug therapy outcomes for Canadians through patient-centred care.<sup>22</sup> To maximize these positive outcomes, pharmacists must promote their expanded clinical role so that other health care professionals and their patients can benefit. This means that pharmacy practice needs to change. First, we all realize that pharmacists need to use their vast knowledge about medications to manage medication therapy through the provision of professional services, rather than technical tasks. The regulation of pharmacy technicians to better support pharmacists, allowing them to focus more on clinical aspects of patient care, is a perfect stepping stone.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the pharmacy business model is changing through the reduction of generic rebates, among other changes to the funding model, narrowing the profit margin for pharmacies focused solely on dispensing a high volume of medications.<sup>4</sup> What better time to promote the value of clinical services, especially as provincial governments are increasingly willing to remunerate for services?

The kicker is that defining pharmacy by clinical services will not work if the public is unaware that these services exist. Patients cannot take advantage of pharmacy services such as medication assessments or pharmacist prescribing unless they are aware of the value that these provide. Currently, patients may be confused about what pharmacists can do for them and so have low expectations, requiring little more from pharmacists than friendly and timely service.<sup>5</sup> It is for this reason that pharmacists must advocate for themselves and promote their abilities and the services they can provide for patients. To increase demand for pharmacy services, patient awareness of clinical services must be improved. Increasing patients' demand for pharmacy services and expectations of their pharmacists will, in turn, provide pharmacists with further opportunities to showcase their value to the health care team and government. To achieve this, pharmacists must first buy into and promote their expanded scope of practice.

### Individual advocacy

Both hospital and community pharmacists have a significant role to play in advocacy of pharmacy as a profession. Advocacy is a tool that has the potential to have a profound impact on pharmacy practice in Canada. This is not something that only the profession's provincial or federal advocacy bodies can and should do. Legislation

is changing. Governments and pharmacy governing bodies are continuing to work to increase the scope of practice of pharmacists, leaving us with an incredible opportunity to grow. As pharmacists, we also need to be taking responsibility for advocating through the interactions we have with patients, other health care professionals and the public. So consider this a call to action for the entire profession. Pharmacists in many different settings can apply the tools below. If the majority of pharmacists do so, the potential for growth, increased patient awareness and sustainability and advancement of this profession are endless.

The following are suggestions and/or tools that pharmacists across Canada can use in their practice to achieve the goals we have for our profession. We have identified 4 distinct groups in which advocacy tools can be used to reach key target groups. These are pharmacists, other health care professionals, patients and the community.

Interaction with other pharmacists and pharmacies may sometimes be challenging because of perceptions of competition, but always remember that working together with the pharmacists within your city, province or country is the very way we can create practice change. Attend conferences not only for the content but also to meet other pharmacists and then stay in contact with them. When you read or hear of a pharmacy that is doing a type of clinical service that you are interested in, contact them and ask questions. Follow journals, blogs and articles and look for ways to apply what has been successful for other pharmacists to what you are trying to do as a pharmacist yourself. Divided, the profession lacks the harmony and consistency to truly change practice and the way we are seen by our key stakeholders; however, united, the possibilities of where our profession will go are endless. Keeping this in mind, we invite pharmacists across Canada to share ideas and collaborate with colleagues to advocate for the profession.

Physicians and other health care professionals are an important group on whom pharmacists need to focus advocacy efforts. This group is the key to developing solid interprofessional relationships and can support our profession when advocating both for and to patients. One simple way of building these relationships is by making a phone call or visit to the offices of physicians, nurse practitioners and so on in your community, as well as those from whom you receive

frequent prescriptions. Use this phone call or visit as an opportunity to introduce yourself with your designation and any pertinent details about yourself. Inform the practitioners of the services provided by your pharmacy, as well as any special areas of training or interest you have. This can also be achieved in a hospital setting by taking opportunities to introduce yourself and explain your practice to other practitioners in the hospital, including nurses, physicians, dietitians and others. Another idea for pharmacists in a hospital setting, as well as possibly community pharmacies or family health teams, is to organize a journal club or presentation for other practitioners to attend.

Possibly the most difficult and important group to advocate to about our role on the health care team is our patients. This can be done using verbal patient interaction tips, as well as nonverbal communication tools. The ultimate goal is to increase your patients' awareness about your role in their health. Keep in mind that we want them to know who we are, what we do and what we can do. There is one simple way to adapt your regular patient interactions to be better advocates: Solve the mystery behind the counter. Take any chance you have to explain to your patients the steps you have gone through to complete the service you have provided. This can be applied to simple dispensing, medication assessments, injections, pharmacist prescribing, over-the-counter recommendations and much more. For example, when counselling patients on a new medication, make them aware that you have checked for any drug interactions with their medications, that this is not one of the medications they are allergic to, or that a dose seemed incorrect so you clarified with their physician. Although these are just a few examples and ultimately every practice is different, every patient interaction must be meaningful. Look for opportunities in your practice to apply this principle.

Nonverbal strategic communication tools can be used for this purpose as well. Some examples are as follows:

- Create a poster or pamphlet describing the services your pharmacy provides, as well as the areas of a pharmacist's expertise and what role a pharmacist can play in patients' health.
- When patients receive an intangible service (one that is not associated with a physical

product, such as a medication assessment), always provide some type of tangible item along with it. This could be a business card, information sheet or note about the service they just received; for example, a checklist of information covered during the patient consult, such as what the medication is for, how to take the medication, side effects and so on.

- Identify yourself. This is a simple and easy, yet crucial, thing to do. Make sure that you are distinguished from other staff and pharmacy assistants or technicians in a community setting. This can be done by wearing a name tag that includes your title, wearing a lab coat, dressing differently from other staff and simply introducing yourself as a pharmacist to the patient at the beginning of any interaction. This is just as important in a hospital setting, as it can be difficult for patients and other health care professionals to identify a pharmacist.

Finally, advocating to your community can be done through newspapers and other widespread promotional communication. Look for opportunities within your community to be involved. For example, outreach can include giving presentations about relevant pharmacy topics to high school students or long-term care residents. This informative and educational interaction can also be used as promotion for your pharmacy, to improve the perception and reputation of pharmacists as a whole. The media still continue to portray pharmacists in a dispensing-focused way, so another tip is to try to use images within your pharmacy and/or on your website or social media pages that are of pharmacists in more clinical roles, such as completing a medication review or taking a patient's blood pressure.

These are all simple ideas that can be applied in most pharmacy practices. They could produce a significant effect on patient perception, increase awareness of pharmacists' new roles and lead to further growth and expansion of pharmacy practice.

## Summary

Pharmacists are moving from traditional and technical dispensing roles to professional and clinical patient-centred services. They have shown that these new professional services

have an essential and positive effect on patient outcomes. However, we must advocate for and promote these new services to 4 key groups—pharmacists, other health care professionals, patients and the community—or what is the point? This advocacy must begin at the grass-roots, with the individual pharmacist, rather than relying solely on our professional organizations.

It begins with the pharmacist eliminating the mystery of “behind the counter.” Both verbal patient interaction tips and nonverbal strategic communication tools can be developed and used to aid in this venture. We invite all pharmacists across Canada to take ownership of their evolving profession and to share ideas and collaborate with their colleagues. ■

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