

Top Unresolved Ethical Challenges and Dilemmas Faced by Community Pharmacists in Providing Pharmaceutical Care: Drawing the Line Between Ethical Challenges and the Quality of the Pharmaceutical Care

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1. The ethical challenges that emerge in community pharmacy practices

Community pharmacists encounter a range of hurdles in providing pharmaceutical treatment, including clinical, ethical, and legal issues, which are the major roadblocks in health care delivery. As a result, there is a significant disparity between the pharmaceutical services currently offered and the gold-standard quality of pharmaceutical care [1]. Some research studies have been conducted in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Arab nations to identify the ethical challenges that community pharmacists encounter in their daily operations. To improve the quality of pharmaceutical care, it is necessary to identify the ethical issues pharmacists encounter, their causes, and the methods by which they can be resolved. Ethical challenges can differ by culture, and approaches to addressing them differ by country.

The ethical problems community pharmacists encounter in GCC and Arab countries can be divided into three categories: challenges to professional practices, challenges to professional communications, and challenges to rules and policies.

1.1 Professionalism-related difficulties

Community pharmacists have highlighted the ethical problems of their professional practices as a challenge of providing pharmacy and consulting services, professional commitments, administering drugs, and avoiding prescription errors and conflicts of interest.

A pharmacist's most significant professional role is to enhance patients' quality of life through the pharmacy practice and consultation. Pharmaceutical care demands pharmacists to be genuine "professionals," taking responsibility for patient care to obtain the required therapeutic outcomes [2].

Some of the difficulties pharmacists encounter arise from their inability to offer pharmaceutical care and consultation due to a variety of factors, including an unorganized work environment, a conflict between regulations and religious beliefs, patients' requests for treatments without a prescription, patients' requests for counterfeit drugs, shortages of medicine, dealing with children's requests for medicine, negative news and transparency, data protection, and unverified medication quality. [3].

The American Pharmacists Association considers truth-telling and transparency to be a duty of pharmacists (American Pharmacists Association, Code of Ethics for Pharmacists). However, telling the truth in practice represents an ethical challenge for pharmacists due to their lack of education and experience in effectively communicating with patients of various cultures [4]. In addition, previous research studies [1] have proven that maintaining patient anonymity is an ethical challenge.

Discrimination in pharmacy practice is also unethical, particularly during times of drug scarcity. Every health professional's ethical obligation is to uphold distributive justice, and national and international guidelines regarding medicine access is a fundamental patient right. As a result, each patient should be treated individually and with justice and fairness in drug supply and distribution [4]. However, due to medicine shortage, prejudices in pharmacy practice remain, depending on the country.

Furthermore, during times of medicine shortages, pharmacists are confronted with requests from patients for imitation pharmaceuticals that have been purposefully and fraudulently mislabelled as to the source and/or identity. Counterfeit drugs account for at least 10% of all medications currently available on the market, and they represent a concern for patient safety in both industrialized and developing nations [5]. Pharmacists are likely to be interested in providing counterfeit pharmaceuticals for financial reasons rather than treating patients, which represents an ethical and professional dilemma. Another ethical issue that the participants raised in the study concerned pharmaceutical quality. The quality of the medicines prescribed has a direct impact on their effectiveness. Low-quality pharmaceuticals may be ineffectual or even harmful to patients. Nevertheless, all healthcare providers must always be benevolent to patients and provide the best service possible.

According to studies, medication errors increase mortality and morbidity [6]. This study also found that there was an absence of a systematic strategy to avoid medication errors, which reduces patient confidence and raises healthcare expenditures. Pharmacists are responsible for screening and preventing prescription errors; nonetheless, patients have the right to know about pharmaceutical errors [6].

1.2 Communication challenges for professionals

Communication skills are one of the most important aptitudes for health professionals, especially pharmacists, because they may have difficulty practising pharmacy without them. One study identified pharmacists' interactions with patients and healthcare providers as the primary moral issue, which is exacerbated by other parties, such as regulators [7].

Patient satisfaction, medication use, and treatment outcome are all influenced by pharmacist–patient communication [8]. Furthermore, efficient pharmacist–patient communication ensures that medications are administered safely. The World Health Organization (WHO) created the "Seven Star Pharmacist" idea in 2000, which positions pharmacists as "communicators" [9]. As a result, pharmacists must be conscious of and informed about the importance of communication skills, as well as adhere to ethical values in their work. All health practitioners should be educated to communicate in an open and helpful manner, according to the British Medical Association [10, 11].

The pharmacist–physician connection, aside from patients, should be professional, scientific, and logical. One of the ethical challenges is their contact with physicians, especially when they need guidance on bad drug responses or drug combinations. Pharmaceutical services can considerably reduce the total cost of care and the length of hospitalization while also enhancing clinical outcomes [12, 13]. However, most doctors do not embrace pharmacists' advice.

This issue could stem from a lack of understanding of the community pharmacist's function as part of a multidisciplinary health care team. Because physicians and pharmacists have a joint responsibility to provide health care, knowledgeable pharmacists may be more sensitive to physician errors, impairing their relationship [14]. As a result, pharmacist–physician contact is a reciprocal relationship, and both parties expect to be treated with respect [15].

1.3 Regulations and policies-related issues

This category includes ethical issues, such as health insurance laws, the contradiction between ethical values and rules, and medication distribution company restrictions.

Pharmacists encounter ethical challenges when their ethical and legal responsibilities collide. Legal considerations and professional ethics can often result in conflict for pharmacists [16]. According to a study,

there is no legal support for practising professional ethics in community pharmacies [17]. However, giving proper support can assist them in fulfilling their professional role in achieving the standard of care [15].

Insurance companies and pharmacists must have a mutually beneficial partnership; unfortunately, insurance firms may not always follow through on their promises to pharmacists, limiting their independence [1].

Insurance companies' adoption of generic drug delivery instead of brand names, as well as regular changes in their laws, not only limit pharmacists' and patients' autonomy but also create trust issues among pharmacists [1].

Selling unneeded pharmaceuticals to pharmacies, presenting drug baskets, selling drugs with presents, and inappropriate drug distribution among community pharmacies are all examples of the unethical activities observed within drug distribution businesses. Because of these issues, pharmacists sometimes overlook product quality, which impacts their professional conduct and decision-making [18].

2. Conclusion

Ethics problems must be addressed in order to enhance the pharmacy practice in community pharmacies and attain an adequate standard of pharmacist contribution to the health system. Some of the issues are caused by external forces that can be addressed by altering the curriculum framework and by teaching professionalism, improving communication skills, and amending laws and regulations to make them more in line with the law and ethical values. Internal aspects relating to pharmacists', physicians', and patients' individual traits should not be overlooked. Furthermore, improving patients' perspectives on health will help to revitalize the pharmacy profession by rekindling pharmacists' enthusiasm for their pharmacy practice and pharmaceutical care.

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