

Self-care and the pharmacist's role: now and the future

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Purpose of this document

This document outlines the views of the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia (PSA) relating to the practice of self-care and the role of pharmacists in supporting and empowering patients.

About PSA

PSA is the only Australian Government-recognised peak national professional pharmacy organisation representing all of Australia's 34,000 pharmacists working in all sectors and across all locations.

PSA is committed to supporting pharmacists in helping Australians to access quality, safe, equitable, efficient and effective health care. PSA believes the expertise of pharmacists can be better utilised to address the health care needs of all Australians.

PSA works to identify, unlock and advance opportunities for pharmacists to realise their full potential, to be appropriately recognised and fairly remunerated.

PSA has a strong and engaged membership base that provides high-quality health care and are the custodians for safe and effective medicine use for the Australian community.

PSA leads and supports innovative and evidence-based healthcare service delivery by pharmacists. PSA provides high-quality practitioner development and practice support to pharmacists and is the custodian of the professional practice standards and guidelines to ensure quality and integrity in the practice of pharmacy.

Introduction

PSA has been a promoter of self-care and an advocate for improved health literacy for many years.¹ PSA as an organisation has had a long-established role and professional responsibility as a standards-setting body and in the delivery of continuing education and professional development opportunities for pharmacists to ensure high standards of skills, knowledge and competency in self-care and pharmacy practice.

The philosophy and practice of self-care fit with PSA's strategic intent and the 11 action items outlined in the *Pharmacists in 2023* report.² These actions are aligned with a pharmacy practice change that is service- and patient-oriented, empowering patients to make decisions on healthy living, prevention and management of minor ailments and chronic disease, and importantly, improving medication safety and the quality use of medicines.³ PSA's *Pharmacists in 2023: Roles and remuneration* document⁴ emphasises the importance of improving and extending the future role of pharmacists in medicine safety and self-care.

Background and context

Self-care has been highlighted by the World Health Organization (WHO) as integral to primary health care and is defined as “the ability of individuals, families and communities to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health, and to cope with illness and disability with or without the support of a healthcare provider”.⁵ Self-care puts the patient at the centre of their own health care,⁶ and encompasses all activities which contribute to physical health and mental health.

The importance and relevance of self-care and patient engagement in health policies and healthcare systems are critical as evidence indicates that individual and population involvement results in significantly improved clinical, economic and humanistic outcomes.⁷ International health services and providers have moved toward incorporating ways to increase patient involvement,^{8,9,10} and embedding patient-centred care principles. The spectrum of care needs to shift from ‘in-hospital care’ to ‘healthy living’. The cost-saving potential of self-care for the Australian health system has been determined “to be between \$1,300 and \$7,515 per hospital patient, per year”.⁷

In October 2020, the Federal Minister for Health launched the “*Self-care for health: a national policy blueprint*” produced by the Mitchell Institute at Victoria University.⁷ This document is timely and may act as a stimulus for the Australian Government to further develop its health policy, particularly since “the Morrison Government has appointed a team of experts to provide independent advice on the development of the Primary Health Care 10-Year plan”,¹¹ in addition to the experience with COVID-19.

PSA supports the key policy areas advocated through the report, including⁷:

- Improving health literacy for all
- Building self-care into health care practice
- Enabling consumers to be active partners in health care
- Assuring the quality and accessibility of digital health information
- Developing measures for individual self-care and self-care support by health services.

Further, PSA notes the structural policy approaches included in the set of proposals are⁷:

- Implementing funding and service models to support self-care
- Driving investment in preventive health and self-care
- Establishing a national approach to enabling and supporting self-care
- Supporting individual and population health through all public policies.

Pharmacists’ current and future role in self-care

The 2017 report of the International Pharmaceutical Federation (FIP) titled “*Pharmacy as a gateway to care: Helping people towards better health*”,¹² adopted the WHO definition for self-care, and provided evidence on the role of pharmacy in self-care. Although FIP has adopted this definition, traditionally the pharmacy sector has associated self-care primarily with non-prescription medicines.

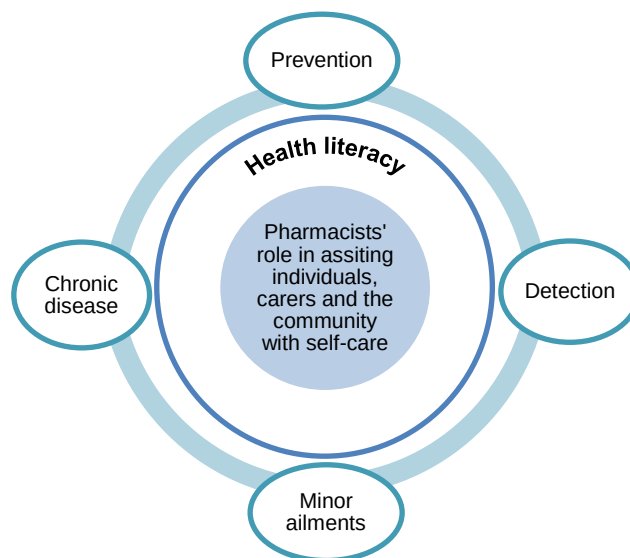
Pharmacists, a widely available and conveniently accessible healthcare resource,¹³ are ideally placed to meet the challenges of ever-evolving patient needs and global healthcare systems.¹⁴ Pharmacists in the community, alongside general practitioners, are typically the first point of contact for patients into the health system.¹⁵ Pharmacists have an integral role as partners in collaborative care teams of healthcare professionals to enhance self-care.^{9,14} Collaboration is driven by the need for greater efficiency and cost-effective health outcomes.¹⁶

PSA notes that the value of pharmacists' input derives from^{12,17}:

- their competency: the ability to safely assess minor illness effectively and distinguish it from major disease
- an economic factor: the ability to support self-care efficiently by reducing health costs, both in terms of medicine and salary costs and through indirect costs by enabling people to remain at work or to minimise time off work
- an integration factor: the ability to ensure continuity of care
- communication and access factors: the ability to interact effectively with the public
- medicine safety: pharmacists are primarily the major point of access for medicines in Australia, which enable the development of patient self-care practices to improve medicine safety.

The role of the pharmacist in self-care has been evolving and increasing as the profession becomes more service- and patient-oriented.¹⁸ The pharmacist's role in self-care can be operationalised into four key areas (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1: Pharmacists' role in assisting individuals, carers and the community with self-care



As shown, health literacy is central to the ability of individuals to manage activities and decision-making around their own health. To improve health literacy and digital literacy skills for all Australians, PSA suggests that pharmacists can support education and capacity-building of individuals and communities through the implementation of a national framework on health literacy.

Establishing and maintaining a solid health and digital literacy base and applying those skills consistently with the support of health professionals will likely improve patient care, particularly through improvements in preventive health, timely resolution of minor ailments and optimal self-management of chronic diseases.

Health literacy Underpinning the four key areas above is the ability of pharmacists to further develop health literacy of individuals and carers. Health literacy is consistently identified as an essential precursor and critical component to effective self-care in individuals and has important implications for understanding health information,^{19,20} guiding health behaviours²¹ and improving health outcomes.²²		
Prevention and detection The concept of self-care is complementary, and central, to the concept of prevention in health. Pharmacists are involved with health promotion by screening for, and increasing the awareness of, certain conditions and discussing strategies such as making healthy lifestyle choices for preventing certain health issues.¹⁴ Pharmacists have rapidly adopted broader roles in providing immunisation services, initially in 2014, and in all states and territories since 2016, leading to increased vaccination rates.^{23,24} The provision of point-of-care-testing (POCT) has become more commonplace in community pharmacies,²⁵ with emphasis on the potential for POCT to aid both acute and long-term condition management.²⁶ Screening and risk assessment programs are being delivered through pharmacies with the aim of identifying patients who have certain undiagnosed or uncontrolled health issues and require further assistance.	Minor ailments Pharmacists play a key role in the diagnosis of minor ailments. The literature has reported that patients may not successfully self-diagnose (and consequently self-manage) their minor ailments.^{27,28} Pharmacists also play an important role in providing individuals with evidence-based advice on non-prescription medicines in accordance with Quality Use of Medicine (QUM) principles and responsible self-medication.¹⁵ A recent study has shown that community pharmacists can provide clinical, humanistic and economic benefits, through the delivery of a standardised minor ailment service to triage, manage and appropriately refer patients through agreed pathways to other health professionals. This offers additional opportunities for facilitating self-care by pharmacists.^{29,30,31} In Australia, it has been estimated that 2.9 to 11.5% of emergency department services and 7 to 21.2% of general practitioner services are amenable to self-care, and can be safely transferred to pharmacy. Further, it is estimated that up to 922,012 emergency department services and up to 26.6 million general practitioner services, for self-treatable conditions, are potentially transferrable to pharmacy. These services equate to an annual cost for the Australian health system of up to \$493.8 million and \$1.2 billion, respectively.³⁰	Chronic disease management The use of medicines is the most common intervention made in health care, particularly for patients with chronic diseases.³ For example, community pharmacists are regular contacts for patients collecting their prescribed medicines and therefore can facilitate self-management in practice to improve medicine safety. Most self-management activities are disease-specific³² and involve increasing patients' confidence to manage their symptoms and disease (self-efficacy).^{32,33,34} Self-management support is a comprehensive and multidimensional concept that looks at how care is provided holistically to the patient, not just as separate episodic interventions.³⁵

Endorsed by PSA Board April 2021

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