

Pharmacists' role in mental health care

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Summary

1. It is critical that people living with a mental health condition and taking medicines have regular access to the expertise of pharmacists to support medication safety, prevent harm and ensure optimal therapeutic outcomes.
2. Pharmacists must be integrated as members of the mental healthcare team to maximise the benefits of their skills in medicine safety and quality use of medicines through a collaborative team-based environment.
3. Clinical practice guidelines relating to the use of medicines in mental health care must include provisions for regular patient access to medication management reviews and pharmacist involvement at transitions of care to improve medication safety and quality use of medicines.
4. To support best practice around early detection and intervention in the community, PSA seeks appropriate funding for development and delivery of initial and refresher mental health first aid training for all pharmacists.
5. PSA calls for greater investment to support viable and sustainable service models in community pharmacies as well as pharmacists integrated into mental healthcare teams to support patients and carers across the continuum of mental illness.

1. Supporting patients with safe and quality use of medicines

PSA strongly advocates for recognition and utilisation of the core expertise of pharmacists in medicine safety, quality use of medicines and medication management to provide care for people living with mental ill health and their carers.

Medicines are a major treatment modality in most mental illnesses. It is reported that almost 17% of the Australian population were prescribed mental health related medicines between 2017-2018.¹ In some instances, people may require life-long treatment with medication to effectively manage their condition.

Research has shown that more than 80% of people living with a psychotic illness experience unpleasant side effects from their medication and one in three people live with moderate to severe impairments due to side effects.¹ It has also been found that people with severe mental illness may have between four and eight medication-related problems per person on average, which include drug interactions and adverse drug reactions.¹ Adverse drug reactions or negative side effects are particularly problematic in medicines used to treat mental ill health as they can lead to poor medication adherence which in turn can cause psychosis, hospitalisation and suicide.²

Pharmacists are medicines experts and have a fundamental role in advising people about their medicines,^{3,4} supporting self-management and medication adherence, monitoring the effects of their medicines and helping to resolve any medicine-related problems such as side effects. Pharmacists also assist people with their health and digital literacy as well as health system literacy which are important to support their mental health care.

More broadly, there is some evidence that community pharmacies are suitable venues for mental-wellbeing promotion to the community.⁵

PSA re-iterates the core role of pharmacists through their medicines and medication management expertise in supporting people living with a mental health condition as well as their carers to improve medication safety, prevent harm and ensure optimal therapeutic outcomes.

2. Pharmacists integrated as members of the mental healthcare team

PSA calls for improved integration of pharmacist care to support a multidisciplinary approach for people with mental illness.

Pharmacists' skills in medicine safety and quality use of medicines provide the most benefit when performed in a collaborative team-based environment. This partnership requires active engagement with other members of the mental healthcare team, rather than pharmacists practising in isolation, and improving interprofessional communication and collaboration. Research has demonstrated the value of involving pharmacists as team members in community mental health care in improving care for people with mental ill health.^{6,7}

Pharmacists, as members of mental healthcare teams, can contribute to improved patient outcomes. For example, medication counselling provided by pharmacists improves adherence to antidepressant medications,⁸ and medication reviews conducted by pharmacists as part of the multidisciplinary team can help to identify and resolve psychotropic medication-related problems.⁹

It has been shown that approximately 70% of people may not respond to the first antidepressant they have been prescribed, which can contribute further to symptoms of depression.¹⁰ Recent evidence suggests pharmacogenomic-guided treatment of depression can improve treatment response.^{11,12} Pharmacogenomic testing offers a significant opportunity to improve patient outcomes given the potential burden of side effects from psychotropic medicines and possibility of long-term therapy. PSA

has recommended¹³ the incorporation of pharmacogenomic testing implementation trials through a collaborative clinical care framework involving pharmacists and other healthcare professionals to personalise medicine therapies for improved safety and quality use of medicines.

3. Improving patient safety through regular medication management reviews

PSA supports the need for strengthened clinical practice guidelines relating to mental health care to improve medication safety and adherence, including regular, proactive patient access to medication management reviews and increased pharmacist involvement during transitions of care.

Adherence to psychotropic medicines remains a significant challenge for individuals in the treatment of mental illnesses. Psychotropic medicines are frequently implicated as a cause of adverse drug events or medicine-related problems.

People with mental ill health often receive care from several healthcare providers in a range of settings. When an individual moves in and out of hospital or has other transitions of care, medication-related problems can arise due to gaps in the person's total medication regimen information, or lack of system or interprofessional connectivity. Errors and omissions on discharge summaries also impact on patient safety during this high risk period, with one study reporting a finding of 66% of discharge summaries containing errors, 27% of which were considered high risk.¹⁴

A core role of pharmacists is in using their skills and expertise in medication management to ensure the safe and appropriate use of medicines, supporting people with medication management and adherence.

Pharmacists can support medication adherence in a number of ways, including the use of dose administration aids (DAAs), staged supply arrangements and by helping the individual build knowledge, skills and understanding of how to use medicines effectively and safely. A recent Australian review reported that a multifaceted approach to interventions is required to improve antidepressant medication adherence.¹⁵

Medication reconciliation undertaken by a pharmacist allows an accurate and current list of a person's medications to be compiled. This supports continuity of care for patients and is particularly important in ensuring safe transition between settings and ongoing management of their medicines.

There is also strong evidence of the benefits of pharmacists performing medication reviews within community mental health teams.⁹ All patients, but particularly those on high risk medicines should have regular, proactive access to medication management services provided by pharmacists – these include hospital clinical pharmacy services, Home Medicines Reviews (HMRs), Residential Medication Management Reviews (RMMRs) and medicines use reviews (MedsCheck service).

It is imperative to ensure safe and effective use of medicines by people with lived experience of mental illness. PSA believes it is critical that clinical practice guidelines relating to mental health care are

strengthened to support routine involvement of pharmacists in team-based care particularly around medication reviews, supporting safe transitions of care, and promoting medicine safety and adherence.

4. Pharmacist training to support early intervention in the community

PSA seeks appropriate funding for development and delivery of initial and refresher mental health first aid training for all pharmacists, and to further support pharmacists to consolidate their practice around early detection and intervention in mental health care.

Pharmacists have a strong primary healthcare role and, due to their accessibility through community pharmacies, are often the first health professionals contacted by a person with a health concern. Pharmacists have the opportunity to recognise potential psychological distress and provide support and guidance for patients experiencing these symptoms. Some pharmacists, however, may lack the knowledge or confidence to action assistance for people experiencing acute mental health episodes.

Multifaceted educational programs involving contact with people with mental ill health as a core element are needed to successfully address mental health stigma and to allow pharmacists to take on a more significant role in the care of people with mental health issues.¹⁶⁻¹⁸

There is some research investigating the concept of community pharmacies providing increased levels of support for individuals with mild to moderate mental illnesses.¹⁹ There was also identification of the need for in-depth training of pharmacy assistants and pharmacists in mental health, with a particular focus on mental health first aid skills and cognitive behaviour and the impact this has on pharmacists' interactions with people with lived experience of mental illness.¹⁹

Pharmacists benefit from Mental Health First Aid training to facilitate early identification, triage and support for people presenting to a pharmacy with mental ill health. Pharmacists can also work in collaboration with a mental healthcare team to provide education and information to the patient or carer about the medicines, or undertake medication reviews to ensure medicine safety or resolve any medication-related concerns or adverse outcomes.

PSA has experience in delivering mental health care training programs for pharmacists, and pharmacists have observed an increase in demand for mental health care interventions. For example, PSA has worked with organisations such as the Black Dog Institute and Primary Health Tasmania to upskill pharmacists in suicide prevention – building confidence and skills to respond to people in distress and at risk of suicide. PSA received funding from the Australian Government Department of Health to deliver Mental Health First Aid training to pharmacists and pharmacy staff in bushfire-affected areas to support communities impacted by the 2019-20 bushfires. PSA is also working in partnership with universities and supported by the Hunter New England Central Coast Primary Health Network to establish mental health friendly pharmacies and explore early identification of mental health problems such as depression in older adults to facilitate timely access to appropriate mental health services.

PSA seeks ongoing funding to deliver training programs which allow pharmacists to continue to improve their skills in relation to mental health care.

5. Investment in sustainable service models

PSA calls for greater investment to support viable and sustainable service models in community pharmacies as well as pharmacists integrated into mental healthcare teams to support patients and carers across the continuum of mental illness.

Pharmacists play an important role in recognising and identifying potential signs of mental ill health and are therefore well placed to provide guidance, support and information to individuals in relation to mental health care.¹³ Pharmacists are also able to assist in obtaining referrals to other health professionals or contacting the individual's GP (with consent). Early detection and intervention are important facets of successful mental health care and supporting pharmacists to deliver these interventions will provide significant benefits to people with mental health issues.

In addition to health promotion and supporting early detection and intervention, pharmacists have a vital role in minimising illness and maximising recovery, tailored to the person's needs. This may involve support through medication adherence, medicine supply services, reviewing and supporting medication management, enhancing continuity of care and medication safety, providing medicine information, supporting health and digital literacy, assisting with the management of physical co-morbidities, or providing lifestyle support and advice.

Pharmacists' skills in quality use of medicines provide the most benefit across the continuum of mental illness when performed in a collaborative team-based environment. PSA strongly suggests there is a need to invest in viable and sustainable service models which integrate pharmacists as effective partners in mental health care. PSA would welcome the opportunity to work with government to co-design training and practice support resources, and to assist as partners in trialling any service implementation models.

Supporting evidence / reference

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