VIEWPOINTS

A Call for Greater Policy Emphasis and Public Health Applications in Pharmacy Education

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In an age of health care reform, incorporating public health into pharmacy practice is key to establishing professional relevancy.¹⁻¹⁵ While a fundamental public health course has traditionally been a mainstay in pharmacy education, there is a need for a practical component of public health to be integrated into the curriculum. As more pharmacy-tailored applications of these concepts arise, students require an appropriate environment to actively engage in practicing public health and develop into visionary leaders.

As one of the most accessible health care professionals in the community, pharmacists have the opportunity to educate patients and optimize medication use. A patient-centered approach places emphasis on patient education while promoting awareness of cultural and language barriers. Pharmacy leadership is important to shift the social misconception that pharmacists are solely dispensers by advocating for greater pharmacist involvement in patient care and education. Through action, pharmacists' roles in chronic disease prevention and management can highlight their value and impact policymakers to expand the scope of the pharmacy profession. The accessibility of community pharmacists allows for greater interpersonal communication, which improves patient understanding and implementation of lifestyle modifications. Pharmacists and student pharmacists must continue to educate the public about their valuable role in managing chronic diseases and promoting prevention and wellness.

As health care reforms are gradually implemented in light of the passage of the Affordable Care Act, there could not be a more exciting time to promote pharmacists' impact on preventative care, a critical concept upon which health care reform is built. There is potential for pharmacists to be recognized as providers of valuable services

through emerging opportunities to perform medication therapy management and take part in collaborative drug therapy management. The emphasis placed on developing patient-centered medical homes and accountable care organizations present opportunities to work in an interdisciplinary health care team and optimize medication use and safety in their patients. Furthermore, the US Public Health Service Report to the Surgeon General, Dr. Regina Benjamin, demonstrating the value and need for pharmacists to be considered providers, and the consequent letter of support from Dr. Benjamin, are indicative of the evolution of the vital role of pharmacists within the health-care team.

When various stakeholders collaboratively advocate for preventative medicine as a critical component in curbing skyrocketing health care costs, our profession must perpetuate awareness of these new roles to practicing pharmacists and develop preparedness in student pharmacist training. In this day and age, it has become critical for student pharmacists not only to experience novel types of practice and public health principles but to apply them and break away from the traditional roles of pharmacy in order to emerge as future leaders within the profession.

The first step in discovering how public health and pharmacy merge on a macrocosmic level is by raising student awareness. Observing pharmacists who serve as integral members of a multidisciplinary team will give students the opportunity to realize the role of pharmacists as valued resources. This can be achieved through advanced pharmacy practice experiences (APPEs), where students can be inspired, empowered, and take notice of what is lacking in the scope of practice of a pharmacist, in hopes that they will one day be driven to seek ways to enact changes within the profession.

Incorporation of a unique APPE at a public health agency distinguishes the macrocosmic and microcosmic approaches of the profession. Such an APPE would allow student pharmacists to critically evaluate pertinent literature in creating sustainable policies and programs while discovering ways to address the health care challenges of high-risk communities. Student pharmacists would

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be exposed to the rules and regulations that guide pharmacy practice, and remain open to the prospect of pharmacists on the forefront of policy discussions and changes that affect the profession. In providing opportunities that shed insight on population-based care, the goal is to enlighten students through hands-on experience that will breed a sense of professional pride and responsibility. Students can garner insight from being immersed in the daily activities of a public health agency and tackle public health challenges from a bird's eye view.

Pharmacists as activists in public health work on implementing opportunities where pharmacy can further establish a foothold in health care reform through various approaches to impart greater relevancy of our profession. However, more pharmacists are needed to join the cause, remain tuned into the changes in pharmacy, and advocate for advancements in our profession. The difficult task of engaging pharmacists to embrace new experiences and greater accountability may be curbed by starting at the student level. It is pertinent to offer students exposure to a public health agency to infuse inspiration, motivate them to commit to a purpose, and in essence, decrease their apathy.

By instilling advocacy and activism, students may be inspired to seek out leadership opportunities in public health. As they transition into pharmacists in an ever-evolving climate of health care reform, they will be driven to lead with a vision of an ideal pharmacy practice. By emphasizing active pharmacy involvement in patient care, we can generate pertinent data and evidence to leverage with our legislators to demonstrate the valuable contributions of pharmacists in promoting health and wellness in disparate communities.

Encouraging students to take the initiative to become more aware and advocate for more public health exposure throughout their pharmacy education is vital. In expressing the need and the desire to pursue a more public health-related dynamic, students can help steer educators toward incorporating more public health practice into our curriculum. Early experiences in a public health agency will generate a passion for advocacy as there is no better time than now. It has become crucial for each and every student and pharmacist to become visionaries — to think of what the profession could be, where we can take it, and how far it can go. In the wise words of Confucius, “It does not matter how slow you go so long as you do not stop.”

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