Minor ailments across Canadian jurisdictions

BY JENNIFER
NOSEWORTHY

HEALTH CARE COSTS CONTINUE TO CLIMB across Canada at a time of overall economic downturn. Governments today are focused on controlling these costs while looking at improving safety and access to care, reducing overhead and seeking value-for-money initiatives.

Pharmacists have the ability to play a crucial role in achieving better care, health and value for Canadians and governments. In recent years, scopes of practice for pharmacists have been expanding across Canadian jurisdictions. Pharmacists are now able to perform additional cognitive services for their patients, making high-quality care more accessible when patients need it most. As a result, pharmacists have a strong role to play in helping this country meet its health care challenges.

One way pharmacists can contribute is through the ability to assess and prescribe for minor ailments. Because of their extensive education, pharmacists in every jurisdiction are trained and experienced in the treatment of minor ailments. However, their options have been limited to over-the-counter medications or to making referrals to physicians or emergency rooms. To date, only Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan

and Alberta* have the legislation, regulation and necessary policies in place to allow pharmacists to participate in minor ailment prescribing, although these are pending in Manitoba, Quebec and New Brunswick.

Since 2011, Nova Scotia pharmacists have been approved to prescribe for a list of more than 30 minor ailments. Similarly, pharmacists in Alberta who have additional prescribing authority can prescribe Schedule I drugs for the treatment of minor ailments.

Of those provinces where pharmacists have prescribing authority, Saskatchewan remains the only province to date where pharmacists are remunerated. The Saskatchewan Ministry of Health funds an \$18 assessment fee for self-care of a minor ailment resulting in the pharmacist prescribing a prescription drug. Approved minor ailments include mild acne, cold sores, insect bites, allergic rhinitis, diaper dermatitis, oral aphthous ulcers and oral thrush. Between February 1 and September 30, 2012, approximately 1450 patients benefited from this service, according to the number of assessment fees submitted to the province. As a result, these patients benefited from timely access to the expertise of their

On the frontline: Minor ailments in Saskatoon

Kristjana Gudmundson likes knowing she can help anyone who walks through the door of her community pharmacy, Nordon Drugs in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. She's been a practising pharmacist for 3 years and helps many patients with minor ailments such as cold sores, allergic rhinitis and oral thrush.

Expanded scope of practice has helped patients see pharmacists as part of the larger health care team, she says. It also helps people caught in a health care human resources shortage.

"Patients might see 10 different doctors from walk-in clinics if they have no family doctor," she says, but if they return to the same pharmacy they can develop a relationship with a pharmacist that is important for continuity of care.

She's had patients switch pharmacies for that relationship. Offering expanded services is easy with all the training and resources now available, she says.

"We have the skills to help patients. That's what we went to school for, to be an active part of the health care team."

—Christine LeBlanc

*Alberta pharmacists who have "additional prescribing authority" can prescribe a Schedule I drug (prescription only) for the treatment of minor ailments.

pharmacist without experiencing long wait times to see a physician or nurse practitioner. Not only would this result in lessening the patient burden of physicians, allowing them to focus on patients requiring more critical care, but it would also help to alleviate financial pressures on the health care system.

In British Columbia, it is estimated that \$95 million is spent annually to treat minor ailments by physicians. If these ailments were moved to pharmacies, it could result in a \$32 million savings to the system annually.¹ Similarly, a recent study in Ontario estimated that 25% to 33% of visits to family physicians in the province could likely be dealt with by pharmacists.² In terms of minor ailments in Ontario, it was estimated that 945,165 hours of physician time could be shifted to pharmacies for a net savings of approximately \$12 million over 5 years.²

Prescribing for minor ailments is just one way pharmacists can better contribute to the delivery

of primary health care while also relieving some of the strain on the system. The addition of this service not only improves access to care but also encourages collaboration between physicians, pharmacists and their patients.

Despite the increasing introduction of expanded scopes across Canada, there is much left to change across the country. How can we work together with a unified voice to support the change that is needed? This is the focus of the national collaborative initiative—the Blueprint for Pharmacy. ■

References

1. British Columbia Pharmacy Association. *Clinical services proposal—treatment of minor ailments*. March 2013. Available: www.bcpharmacy.ca/uploads/Treatment_of_Minor_Ailments.pdf (accessed July 26, 2013).
2. Accenture. *Understanding the value of expanded pharmacist authority in Ontario*. 2012. Available: www.opatoday.com/index.php/component/content/article/1641-value-of-expanded-authority-release.html (accessed July 26, 2013).

Setting priorities for the future of pharmacy

The Blueprint for Pharmacy is designed to catalyze, coordinate and facilitate the changes required to align pharmacy practice with the health care needs of Canadians. The recently released report, *The Blueprint for Pharmacy: Our Way Forward*, focuses on the profession's achievements to date and highlights priorities for the future of pharmacy practice in Canada:

- Track and forecast pharmacy human resources requirements
- Facilitate integration of regulated pharmacy technicians into community pharmacy
- Enhance accessibility to and quality of academic program experiential education in hospitals, primary care clinics and community pharmacy settings
- Enhance the continuing professional development opportunities for pharmacists and pharmacy technicians in providing patient-centred care and expanded services
- Support the rollout of pan-Canadian clinical decision support software
- Facilitate integration of e-prescribing and drug information systems into community and hospital pharmacies
- Undertake a national public relations campaign about the value of pharmacy services
- Facilitate uptake of community pharmacy business models that incorporate new patient care services
- Create, acquire and disseminate valid and reliable assessments of the value of pharmacy services
- Support legislative and regulatory changes to expand scope of practice for pharmacists and pharmacy technicians

For more information or to download a copy of *The Blueprint for Pharmacy: Our Way Forward* report, visit the Blueprint for Pharmacy's website at www.blueprintforpharmacy.ca.

The Translator: Pharmacists managing minor ailments

The Translator is a CPhA initiative that supports knowledge translation between pharmacy practice research and health policy. Each issue features a number of pharmacy practice research articles, briefly summarizes them and discusses the health care policy implications. These articles are submitted by researchers who have a strong desire to support evidence-based health care policy and best practices. International studies showing the benefits to the health care system and patients when pharmacists manage minor ailments are highlighted in the next issue of *The Translator*:

- The management of minor ailments by pharmacists can lead to substantial health care savings.
- Increasing uptake of the minor ailment service is provided by pharmacists in Scotland.
- Community pharmacists are well trained in the management of various dermatological ailments.
- Pharmacists are the first port of call for many minor ailments in children.

To read more, see www.pharmacists.ca/the-translator. *The Translator* is made possible in part through an unrestricted educational grant from Pfizer.

Watch for our next issue on pharmacists in team-based care.