The essential role of pharmacists in the opioid crisis

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NALOXONE IS A MEDICATION THAT CAN SAVE lives during an opioid overdose. Although it has been used for many years in hospital settings, in recent years, it has been introduced in the community setting in take-home kits. People are encouraged to keep a naloxone kit in their homes, and many emergency responders as well as the RCMP are equipped with naloxone.

Canada is currently suffering from an opioid crisis. CPhA and pharmacists across the country have been playing an active role in educating the public, building awareness about opioid misuse and lobbying the government to acknowledge the role of pharmacists in addressing the crisis. Pharmacists are embracing their role as health educators who strive to provide information about opioid medications, overdoses and stewardship. They can help save lives, and reduce health care costs.

As one of the most accessible and trusted health professionals, pharmacists can answer questions about reducing the risk of overdose, what to do in case of an overdose, and where to seek help with addiction management services. Because pharmacists have access to patients' medication records, they can identify high-risk patients earlier than other health care professionals. Many pharmacies offer addiction management services, such as by dispensing methadone and buprenorphine/naloxone.

Since naloxone is now available without a prescription, pharmacists are one of its top providers. In fact, Alberta Health Services has posted a weekly updated list of all pharmacies in Alberta that carry take-home naloxone kits. In provinces like Ontario, eligible patients can request a naloxone kit free of charge with a health card through the Ontario Naloxone Pharmacy Program.

Previously, CPhA partnered with the UW School of Pharmacy to create a video about

injectable naloxone. *CPJ* published a practice tool on this topic in 2016. Since then, there have been substantial changes to naloxone use in the community. Now, naloxone is available without a prescription in all 10 provinces and 3 territories. In December 2016, naloxone nasal spray also became a schedule II medication. Narcan, its brand name, is currently manufactured in the US under the company ADAPT and is not as widely available as the injection; however, it is much easier for patients to administer. CPhA has created a video and infographic about the nasal spray to teach people how to administer it, and this is another education tool.

CPhA has also provided its members access to webinars about naloxone. Pharmacists can learn about naloxone, how to counsel patients and were given a chance to ask their own questions about naloxone.

Working with other health professionals, regulators, law enforcement and the government, CPhA also promotes the role and importance of pharmacists, as well as the need for programs to address the opioid crisis. In March 2016, CPhA welcomed Health Canada's decision to change the prescription status of naloxone to a schedule II drug.

In terms of conducting research, CPhA has been working on creating a naloxone environmental scan, highlighting access to naloxone in community pharmacies across the country. This scan is a tool to help identify gaps and barriers to naloxone supply and access, as well as promote further discussion about how pharmacy plays a role in the opioid crisis, especially regarding naloxone distribution.

CPhA has provided continuous support to pharmacists, who play an active frontline role in combating the opioid crisis. Naloxone is an intervention that has been proven to save lives,

and pharmacists have a critical role to play in ensuring that it is made available to those who can intervene when overdoses occur. There is

still a lot of work to be done, and pharmacists should be encouraged to continue with their efforts to overcome this epidemic. ■

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Reference

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