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## DOES THE US UTILIZE ITS PHARMACIST WORKFORCE EFFECTIVELY?

Pharmacists are trained for several years at accredited colleges throughout the nation in order to optimize patients' care plans and improve healthcare outcomes for those they assist. After attending two to four years of undergraduate school, four years of graduate school, and passing the North American Pharmacist Licensure Examination (NAPLEX,) pharmacists are experts on the subject of drugs, and they utilize their knowledge to ensure their patients receive the best care possible. To make sure these healthcare professionals are up to date on all current practices, they also complete Continuing Education (CE) courses after receiving their degree, to ensure excellence in their field. With all the education and qualifications used to optimize patient care, pharmacists have a great deal to offer to the field of medicine. This begs the question: does America utilize its pharmacy workforce effectively?

In the United States, all practicing pharmacists must pass the NAPLEX, no matter what state they attain their PharmD in. But once these pharmacists acquire their licenses, there are differences in what is in their scope of practice. Different state laws and rules set forth by the

state government and the state board of pharmacy dictate what is and is not allowed for a pharmacist to do. This means that someone practicing in Ohio may be able to complete tasks that someone practicing in California cannot, or vice versa, even though they have the same degree and completed the same licensure exam. For instance, pharmacists in Wyoming are able to administer COVID-19 vaccinations to patients of any age, whereas pharmacists in New Jersey are only allowed to administer the same vaccinations to patients eighteen years or older.<sup>1</sup> To make matters more complicated, there are twenty-two other states that fall somewhere in between, allowing for COVID-19 vaccinations starting at three to seventeen years old.<sup>1</sup> There is a great deal of inconsistency in what pharmacists are able to do for their patients based on their state of practice. Therefore, pharmacists in certain states could be offering their patients better care via various tasks, but they are not able to due to their geographic location. This seems to be an underutilization of these pharmacists.

Some pharmacists acquire a larger scope of practice by forming a collaborative practice with another practitioner who has a license to prescribe. Collaborative practice agreements are "voluntary agreements that create a formal practice relationship between a pharmacist and a prescriber, whereby the prescriber delegates certain functions to the pharmacist..."<sup>2</sup> This greatly expands pharmacists' ability to help their patients. Through this new function, pharmacists are able to initiate, adjust, and discontinue medications to optimize their patients' care. This streamlines the process of care for these patients, as pharmacists with a collaborative practice agreement no longer need to contact that prescriber, who would then implement the changes recommended by the pharmacist. Pharmacists are also able to order laboratory tests for their patients as well. This can aid them to make decisions about medications, like making dose adjustments for drugs like vancomycin, amikacin, and



amiodarone. Giving pharmacists better tools will help them to work more efficiently, so they can care for more patients. While collaborative practice agreements are an excellent resource for pharmacists, they can only enter into these agreements if allowed by their state laws and hospital protocols, which have varying levels of authorizations for pharmacists. Enabling more inpatient hospital pharmacists to enter into these agreements and expanding collaborative practice agreements that are limited in some states would utilize these healthcare professionals more and would therefore benefit the American public.

An area of pharmacy that seems to be growing is telehealth services. These services are estimated to have increased by fifty to seventy-five percent since the start of the pandemic.<sup>3</sup> The services offered by pharmacists currently include medication therapy management, chronic disease management, transitions of care, pharmacogenomics, remote dispensing, and ambulatory care.<sup>4</sup> We may see even more services develop in the future. As access to care in rural areas can be a problem for some patients, utilizing telehealth services can expand how we utilize our pharmacist workforce and benefit our patients.

An area that may cause trouble for pharmacists' ability to care for patients is billing. Pharmacists are limited in their ability to bill Medicare and Medicaid independently for their services.<sup>5</sup> This is because Medicare does not recognize pharmacists as eligible providers, and Medicaid's allowance for independently billing varies from state to state.<sup>5</sup> While community pharmacists may be able to bill for services like medication therapy management independently, this is the exception, not the rule.<sup>5</sup> Pharmacists have had problems with receiving reimbursement from insurance companies for necessary services they provide for patients due to not being

deemed independent providers. As a result, services like testing for illnesses are not yet able to be billed by community pharmacists. Granting pharmacist the title of an eligible provider in this context would allow more community pharmacies to expand their offerings for patients, as they will be able to be paid for these services.

The role of the pharmacist is different outside of the United States. For instance, graduates with pharmacy degree in India have healthcare jobs in areas such as pharmacovigilance, quality control management and medical writing.<sup>6</sup> Some may even become duty medical officers, who can run their own clinic.<sup>7</sup>

Many countries in Europe have been known to regulate the sale of not only prescription drugs, but over-the-counter agents via the use of a pharmacist. While Americans can stop by the grocery store and pick up an over-the-counter item for themselves or a loved one, countries like Italy and Spain have required patients to speak to the pharmacist before purchasing such items in years past.<sup>8</sup> While this can seem restrictive to patients, this expands the role of the community pharmacist. In Italy, patients come to their local pharmacist to check their blood pressure.<sup>8</sup> This can help them to counsel their patients with a better understanding of their patients' health. Some of these countries are also able to offer more medications without the need of prescription because pharmacists will be sure to advise their patients before the sale.<sup>8</sup> While all American pharmacists are required to offer counseling, this sometimes means the patient simply checking a box on a screen and moving on. These European countries instead require a conversation with the pharmacist before purchasing over-the-counter items to ensure patients receive the best care possible. So, there are a variety of practices done by pharmacists outside the United States that have yet to be adopted by America.



In conclusion, the role of the pharmacist has expanded in years past, but it must expand further in order to fully utilize these professionals effectively. Expanding the ability of pharmacists to offer care like vaccinations to become uniform across all fifty states would allow for more utilization of community pharmacists, as pharmacists in some states are able to offer more forms of care than in other states. Increasing the number of inpatient pharmacists with collaborative practice agreements would help to better utilize these healthcare workers, as they will be able to adjust patients' medication plans more efficiently by being able to make orders directly and independently. Boards of pharmacy may also look to other countries for ideas of how to expand pharmacists' services and how to better utilize their skills. There are a great many ways that the United States can evolve the way pharmacists practice in order to utilize the workforce for effectively, and some of these methods will hopefully be employed in the near future.

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