A pharmacist’s role in mental health care

Providing appropriate care for patients with mental illness necessitates a multidisciplinary approach.

The frequency with which mental illness occurs in Australians (i.e. it affects one in five at some time in their lives) demands that the specialist skills of many health professionals including pharmacists needs to be enlisted to deal with the complexity of issues so often seen in this group of patients, not the least of which is drug therapy.

Standards for the practice of psychiatric pharmacy

A pharmacist’s role and responsibilities in caring for people with a mental illness is outlined in The Society of Hospital Pharmacists of Australia’s Standards for the Practice of Psychiatric Pharmacy (‘the Standards’). Although published in 2000, the document remains relevant, describing the contribution by the pharmacist as ensuring ‘drug therapy is rational, safe, cost-effective and acceptable to patients’.

Since drug therapy forms an integral part of treatment for mental illnesses, a pharmacist having extensive training in pharmacology, pharmaceutics and pharmacokinetics, is well placed to provide input toward optimising drug therapy and patient compliance. Patients and other health professionals should look to pharmacists to provide advice such as:

- usual dose of the medicine, route(s) of administration, and common duration of therapy;
- special precautions that should be considered prior to commencing treatment;
- common adverse effects that can reasonably be expected in the context of routine treatment;
- other adverse effects that are less common but are particularly serious or troublesome;
- drug interactions including those with complimentary therapies, and including drug interactions with a pharmacokinetic or pharmacodynamic basis;
- pharmacokinetic issues including delay in onset of action, ‘washout’ periods, and issues related to discontinuation of therapy;
- possible effects of treatment upon co-morbid medical or psychiatric conditions;
• requirements for modified approach to treatment in the context of advanced age, renal impairment or severe hepatic dysfunction;
• use of drugs in special cases (pregnancy, during breast-feeding, perioperative use); and
• critical patient counselling issues.

These practice elements are consistent with an effective clinical pharmacy service and apply to the pharmaceutical care of patients with any medical condition. However the nature of mental illnesses and the challenges inherent in their management make some of these elements of pharmacy service particularly important. Patients affected by mental illness have been identified as being at risk of adverse drug reactions and other medication-related problems and pharmacists can and should play an important role in detecting, preventing and managing these unwanted effects.

The potential for drug interactions involving psychotropic medications is high since many of these agents influence hepatic drug metabolism. Many patients with mental illness require drug therapy for other coexisting medical conditions and these may be profoundly influenced by concurrent treatment with psychotropic drugs.

Patient education and counselling on medication is especially important in patients with mental illness since poor compliance and adherence to prescribed regimens commonly leads to negative treatment outcomes.

The care of patients with mental illness is not restricted to the specialised psychiatric care setting – a setting where pharmacists usually possess advance psychiatric pharmacy skills. The high incidence of co-morbidities in the patients with mental illness means that they frequently require treatment in a general medical or surgical ward. In these cases the pharmacist can provide valuable assistance to nursing staff and medical practitioners through information and advice on the psychotropic drugs being used, their effect on other drugs and conditions, and the potential for drug interactions.

**Mental Health Tertiary Curricula Initiative**

A recent initiative of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), the Mental Health Tertiary Curricula Initiative which was developed as part of the National Action Plan on Mental Health 2006 – 2011, is aimed at enhancing the mental health skills of the newly graduating health workforce. The objective of the program is to improve current training programs for health professionals by expanding the mental health components of
undergraduate health training. Through the initiative, graduates from undergraduate health courses including nursing, dietetics, pharmacy and occupational therapy will gain a greater understanding of mental health issues and further skills in the assessment, management and referral of people with a mental illness.

The application of the SHPA Standards by current pharmacy practitioners and the outcomes of changes to the undergraduate pharmacy curriculum in the future, provide the means by which pharmacists, within and outside the specialised psychiatric care setting, can increasingly apply specialist medicines knowledge to enhance the care of patients with mental illnesses.

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References


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