

# Spotlight on...

# Pharmacists



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## When it comes to pharmacists, what they know can save your life.

We all know the importance of healthcare in America today, but how many people know about the role pharmacists play in the healthcare system? For too long pharmacists have been taken for granted as pill counters, but their wealth of knowledge on medications can be utilized to save lives, reduce costs, and improve medical care. As medications continue to become an important part of our health care, the idea of recognizing the pharmacist as an expert on medication therapy management is growing in importance. The entertainment industry can help by taking every opportunity to show how pharmacists can contribute to a patient's health and make a difference in the lives of many—a difference that can mean life or death. The improper management of medications costs lives and money, and is a very emotional issue for many people. Read on to find out why...



## Prescription Drugs: An Overview



How big a part of our healthcare system are we talking about? Here are some statistics:

- Americans received a record 3.27 billion prescriptions in 2004 alone,<sup>1</sup> representing an economic value of \$221.0 billion.<sup>2</sup>
- More than half of the people in the US take at least one prescription medication each year. The average is 7.5 prescriptions per patient per year.<sup>3</sup>

• However, prescription drugs ONLY represent approximately ten percent of the nation's overall healthcare costs.<sup>4</sup>

Medications are becoming more and more important for a number of reasons. New drugs are being developed for illnesses that were previously more difficult to treat. These new medications help people stay healthy and reduce overall health care costs by keeping people out of the hospital and long term care facilities. Pharmacists help achieve these positive outcomes and keep costs down by helping patients take their medications correctly.

Another critical factor is the role the elderly are playing in the healthcare system. The elderly are living longer as a result of prescription medications, and take more prescriptions on average than any other age group.<sup>5</sup> Senior citizens represent 12% of the U.S. population and account for 33% of the medications prescribed.<sup>6</sup> As the population ages, many more Americans are functioning as the caregivers for parents or a spouse. Pharmacists are the initial source of information for them as they manage the many prescriptions of their loved ones and are involved in the medication therapy management of an enormous number of Americans.



## “What Do Pharmacists Know That Doctors Don’t?”

Pharmacists are highly trained medical professionals.<sup>7</sup> All have at least a 5-year Bachelor of Science in Pharmacy, and now, all newly trained pharmacists have at least a six year Doctor of Pharmacy (Pharm D.) degree. Pharmacists undergo 1) extensive training in the chemical compositions of medications, 2) how medication works within the body, 3) the proper use and handling, and the 4) adverse reactions that can occur and how to prevent them. While doctors and nurses can treat and diagnose patients, pharmacists are the medication experts on the health care team. They also are specially trained in patient education, effective communication, and medication and disease management.

As much as they help alleviate and cure our illnesses, all medications come with risks. Pharmacists play an important role in helping patients understand both the benefits and risks of medications. Complications and unnecessary medical problems can be avoided when effective communication occurs between patients and pharmacists.

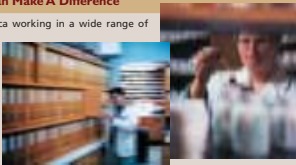
A recent example is the popular pain medications, Vioxx and Bextra [COX-2 selective Non-Steroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs)], being pulled from the market. Pharmacists helped alleviate confusions caused by the withdrawal of the products from the market and assisted patients and physicians in selecting appropriate alternative therapies.

The FDA is also asking manufacturers of non-prescription (over-the-counter) NSAIDs, such as ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin IB) and naproxen (Aleve), to revise their labeling to provide more specific information about the potential risks of these products. Pharmacists inform patients of the limited dose and duration of treatment of these products in accordance with the package instructions.<sup>9</sup> The pharmacist plays an important role with these prescription and non-prescription medications to educate patients on not only their safe use, but also their benefits and potential risks.

## The Evolving Role of the Pharmacist: How Pharmacists Can Make A Difference

There are approximately 200,000 pharmacists in America working in a wide range of settings including:<sup>10</sup>

- Community pharmacy (chain and independent)
- Hospital pharmacy
- Managed care
- Consultant pharmacy
- Association management
- Research and drug development
- Sales and marketing
- Long-term care facilities
- Academia
- Government agencies such as the Department of Defense, Department of Veterans Affairs, Indian Health Service and the Public Health Service.



The largest single group consists of over 100,000 pharmacists working in chain community pharmacies, and with at least six years of education, these pharmacists are anything but store clerks.

## Get the Most Out of Your Medications



These responsibilities vary among the different areas of pharmacy practice, the ultimate goal of the pharmacist is to help patients get the most out of their medications while minimizing any adverse effects of drug therapy. This concept is also known as “medication therapy management.” The comprehensive care a pharmacist provides to a patient, beyond the accurate dispensing of the prescription.<sup>11</sup> Pharmacists educate the patient about his or her medication and the condition for which it is prescribed, review the patient’s medication history (both prescription and over-the-counter use), monitor the patient’s drug therapy over time, screen for potential adverse effects of medication, and monitor the patient’s ability to take their medication correctly. Care provided by pharmacists has been shown to improve the health care of patients as well as their quality of life.<sup>12</sup>

By working closely with patients, pharmacists can help improve outcomes to:

- Decrease adverse drug reactions
- Decrease hospitalizations
- Decrease emergency room visits
- Prevent drug-drug and drug-food interactions

## The Asheville Project:

A recent case study in Asheville, NC, showed the benefits of increasing pharmacist-to-patient interaction. The city of Asheville developed and financed extensive medication care management programs for employees with chronic conditions such as diabetes, asthma, hypertension and high cholesterol.<sup>25</sup> In the first year of the program, the study demonstrated that there was a 20-30% decrease in overall medical care expenditures for diabetic patients through the increased intervention by a pharmacist.<sup>26</sup> Five years later, a sustained and ongoing reduction in healthcare costs of 58% was achieved.<sup>27</sup> This isn’t just about saving money, it’s about improving people’s health.

## Significant Digits

\$177.4 billion—Cost of drug-related morbidity and mortality in 2000<sup>13</sup>

\$121.5 billion—Cost of hospitalizations due to prescription-related problems in 2000<sup>14</sup>

\$32.8 billion—Cost of long-term care due to pharmaceutical complications in 2000<sup>15</sup>

\$5.8 billion—Annual cost of emergency room visits from adverse effects of medications<sup>16</sup>

40% of senior citizens fail to follow Rx orders (due to cost, complicated drug therapy regimens, side effects or they do not believe they need the medicine prescribed)<sup>17</sup>

46% of senior citizens surveyed take more than five Rx medications<sup>18</sup>

80%—Chance of a drug interaction in patients taking six or more medications<sup>19</sup>

Nearly 100%—Chance of a drug interaction in patients taking eight or more medications<sup>20</sup>

30%—Number of refillable prescriptions that are never refilled, often interfering with important medical treatment<sup>21</sup>



By using their expertise, pharmacists can reduce overall healthcare costs by decreasing the number of hospitalizations and emergency room visits due to adverse drug reactions and preventing drug-drug and drug-food interactions. Preventing these adverse effects is an essential task of the pharmacist, especially for those patients who are taking a number of prescriptions.

This is especially important in the elderly population, as an estimated 8.2 to 16.7 million ambulatory care visits in the year 2000 resulted in at least one inappropriate drug being prescribed to the elderly.<sup>22</sup> This is an important safety issue. Inappropriate drug use in the elderly is associated with adverse drug reactions, worsening physical function and excess healthcare utilization. This is an important concern for patient safety and rational use of healthcare resources.<sup>23</sup> These findings suggest the need for greater attention to appropriate prescribing and supportive interventions in ambulatory care.<sup>24</sup> As a patient’s medication manager and most accessible healthcare provider, pharmacists can prevent and intervene when necessary to reduce these kinds of problems.

## Why Should You Care? Because Your Viewers Do



Pharmacists are well-trained and easily accessible medical professionals, but patients need to know how to take advantage of their pharmacists' expertise. You can help communicate this message through your creative works. The next time you or your characters have a question about medication, or are curious about what you can do to make it work better, don't forget that your physician isn't the only person you can speak with. Your pharmacist is even more accessible, and these kinds of questions are their specialty. You don't need an appointment, and many pharmacies are open 24 hours a day. Informing Americans about the resources available from their pharmacist will ensure that more and more of us will better utilize them in the future. Getting smart on this issue will not only prevent unnecessary deaths from adverse drug reactions; it will save the healthcare system and the economy billions of dollars a year, and will result in improved patient care and reduced health care costs. And if that's not enough, it will give your viewers something different to watch—that's never a bad thing, is it?

**Not Sure Where to Start?** Go to [www.eiconline.org](http://www.eiconline.org) for more information on how important pharmacists are in patients' health care management—and how their inclusion in your production can benefit you.

## Setting the Scene: On Location with Pharmacists.

### In the Drug Store:

Depiction Idea: The "medication therapy management" concept can be conveyed easily onscreen, and will lend a seldom-seen setting and real-life interaction that everyone watching will be able to relate to. If a character in your production is at the pharmacy, try to remember that the pharmacist is not just a cashier. Where possible attempt to show him or her interacting with the patient, have the patient ask questions about the medication, or have the pharmacist speak with the character about being compliant with the medication therapy and getting their prescription refilled. Thirty percent of all refillable prescriptions are never refilled<sup>20</sup>, and this simple, short exchange could depict how that could be avoided.

There are many different choices of over-the-counter (OTC) medications, and in most cases, consumers make their own decisions about what to buy and how to use OTCs. Unfortunately, the choices are sometimes based on price or packaging alone. Consider showing characters who doesn't know what medication to purchase for themselves or their children or elderly parents, and the consequences that may result if they make the wrong choice without consulting a pharmacist.

Imagine a mother at home with a sick infant, questioning how much medication to give her child. Who would the mother call in the middle of the night? The pharmacist who is available?

Community pharmacists are in an excellent position to recommend cost effective medications: For example, when a health-care provider prescribes a medication that may not be covered by insurance or has a high co-pay, the pharmacist may recommend a more cost-effective alternative to the prescribing health care provider that will work just as well as the original medication prescribed, therefore saving the patient a significant amount of money.

Many people receive flu shots, have their blood pressure, cholesterol and blood glucose taken at a pharmacy. Consider showing the pharmacy as an alternative setting for characters with specific concerns about their health.

### At the Hospital:

Often on medical dramas, patients present with bizarre or unusual symptoms. Consider taking a cue from real life and show the doctors calling the pharmacists for research on how medications might help alleviate or might even be the source of the patient's symptoms.



The ultimate goal of the pharmacist is to help patients get the most out of their medications while minimizing any adverse effects of drug therapy.

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