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Promoting the practice of clinical pharmacy

by David John Woods¹

Clinical Pharmacy has many definitions but simply put it means promoting the safe and effective use of medicines by providing advice on all aspects of pharmacotherapy. This can range from pharmacists' participation in clinical decision making and attendance on ward rounds to advice on error prevention.

In many hospitals throughout the world, the role of the pharmacist predominantly involves supply, stock control and dispensing. This restricted role may be partly due to low numbers of pharmacists which makes expanding services particularly challenging. However, service developments are possible whatever the resources of the department.

Small steps first - It is easy to be too ambitious at the start and it is better to be realistic about what can be achieved with the available resources. Simple projects such as medicines information bulletins, pharmacovigilance reports and medicines safety initiatives will, if successful, gain wider support and lead to more opportunities. Starting full clinical pharmacy services on one "high-impact" ward (e.g. medical) will be more successful than trying to introduce services to the whole hospital. A multidisciplinary approach is recommended; involve and gain the support of senior physicians and nurses.

Focus on professional strengths - Consider the unique attributes and skills of the pharmacist. A visit to any hospital ward will provide numerous opportunities to give advice on the correct and safe use of medicines, even without seeing a patient's chart. This could be advising on safe IV administration practices, paediatric formulation or reporting of Adverse Drug Reactions (ADR). As the value of the pharmacist is shown, more opportunities will arise.

Document your activities - It is important to report activities, interventions and project outcomes to hospital management. The value of clinical pharmacy has to be shown with good data. If you start documenting at the start of services it will help to justify their expansion.

Research is the key - Even small projects and innovations can constitute valuable research which should be published in national and international journals. A research-active clinical pharmacy team will promote the profile of pharmacy in the hospital. There are many opportunities, e.g. simple Drug Utilisation Evaluations, audits, ADR case reports and solving drug administration problems in critical care, to name but a few. A research culture in the service can lead to major projects which can gain international recognition.

In summary, the development of clinical pharmacy services involves commitment and vision and the application of the unique skills and knowledge of the pharmacist. It is often a challenge to change old established systems. Give your colleagues time to appreciate and respect the changes; start low (simple), go slow, and involve all members of the health care team in your activities. Documentation of activities and associated research is very important.

1. David John Woods is a clinical and consultant pharmacist based in Dunedin, New Zealand. He is Clinical Manager of BPAC (Best Practice Advocacy Company – better medicine; www.bpac.org.nz), and teaches clinical pharmacy and medical informatics at the School of Pharmacy, University of Otago. He has consulted and advised on pharmaceutical issues in several developing countries and for the WHO. Some specific interests include teaching clinical pharmacy, research on paediatric formulations and eLearning.