

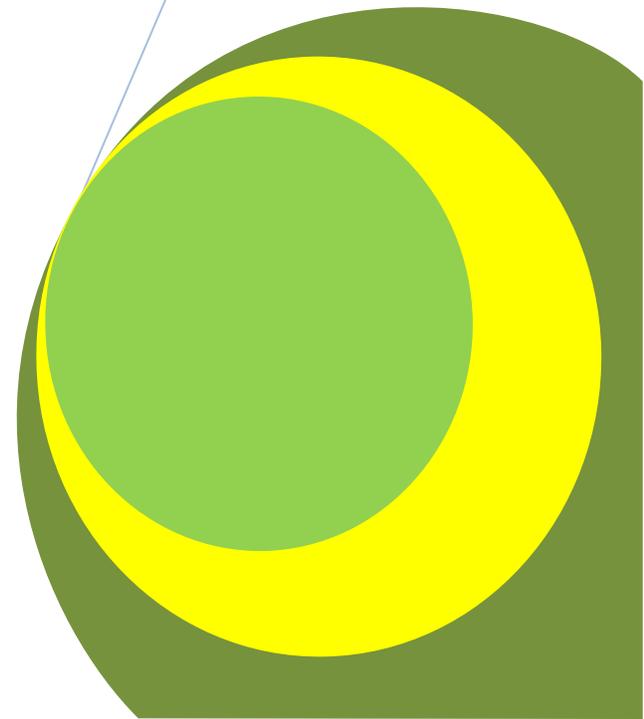
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Strategies to Address over the Counter Sale of Prescription Medicines in Abu Dhabi, UAE

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Research Article

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates one major ethical issue in health care in the UAE with a view to identifying strategies to address the problem. Throughout Abu Dhabi, prescription required medicines are sold without an accompanying prescription, with inherent implications for illness, injury or even fatality. The methodologies involve participant observation of buyers and sellers of prescription medicines and a brief survey of the pharmaceutical outlets and their client. The results reveal widespread over the counter sale of prescription medicines, together with reasons why the practice prevails in Abu Dhabi. The article concludes that an urgent need exists to stop the practice and suggest a number of strategies to ameliorate the situation. The proposed strategies include enforcement of existing legislation and professional ethics, general public awareness campaigns and education.

Keywords: Strategies Sale Medicines Over the counter Abu Dhabi.

INTRODUCTION

Ethics is the heart of health care (Seedhouse, 2003), and there is an expectation that health care providers and all health professionals will adopt a degree of ethics in their professional duties. Throughout the UAE, stories of unethical health care practices continue to be heard and read unabated. From Abu Dhabi to Ras Al Khaimah, Dubai to Fujairah, stories of unethical health practices have been doing the newspaper rounds regularly (see, for example, Gulf News, 2011a: 2 and Gulf News, 2011b 3).

This study focuses on one major ethical issue - over the counter sale of prescription medication including very powerful and highly dangerous drugs which endanger lives (if used without medical supervision). The great diversity of population, the large number of nationalities (Yeboah, 2007) as well as the associated cultural realism and the cosmopolitan nature of the UAE society presuppose the prevalence of numerous and diverse norms, values, beliefs, attitudes and perception towards health. The point must further be made that, while different population subgroups have different ethical and cultural practices, there is convergence of thought that over the counter sale of prescription medications is unethical and dangerous. There is research evidence to collaborate the position that ethics is a major issue in health care (see, for example, Yeboah, 2000; Seedhouse 2003: 96 and 117; and Raven 2002).

PURPOSE OF AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

The purpose of this article is, therefore, to examine over the counter sale of prescription medications in Abu Dhabi, draw attention to the practice and propose strategies to ameliorate the situation. The point is that ethics is the fundamental basis for effective and efficient health care, and unethical practices, such as selling prescription medications over the counter, undermine efforts to improve health status in the Emirate. For example, the dangerous practice of selling prescription only drugs over the counter has created injuries, illnesses and fatalities. The situation will get worse if not addressed. The best approach to addressing this ethical and unlawful problem is to draw attention to the problems through research and publication of research findings; this is the rationale behind the study. We need to address the problem, but to ensure the efficient and effective approach to addressing the problems, evidence based research is absolutely essential to identify appropriate strategies. Sight should also not be lost to the fact that no such study has been undertaken in the UAE, albeit ethical issues, such as over the counter sale of prescription only drugs, remain problematic. The need to identify and address the underlying issues cannot be

overemphasized and the study will provide further insights into the issues, strengthening the need for and importance of the study.

Methodologies and data sources

A triangulation approach was adopted for the study methodologies. This allowed for diverse analysis of data from at least 2 or more methodologies to be used in the investigation (see Patten, 1990; Yeboah, 2010). About 90 pharmaceutical outlets were initially selected randomly for the study. However, 17 refused to participate in the study, resulting in a response rate of approximately 77.2%. Survey and participant observation data were obtained on the 73 pharmaceutical outlets or chemists which agreed to participate. It was impossible to randomly select patients who were buying prescription medicines without the necessary or required prescription, as no sampling frame could be created for customers or patients who buy prescription medicines over the counter. A convenient but systematic sampling approach was adopted, involving the selection for inclusion of every 3rd patient who bought medicines without the necessary prescription. 131 patients in various outlets were interviewed as they agreed to participate.

A pre-designed questionnaire was used to interview both patients and pharmaceutical outlets to identify the underlying reasons for the practice and how the practice could be stopped. Participant observation methodology was used to establish the extent of the practice through the direct observation of the practice in the selected outlets. The main sources of data were, therefore, the survey responses and the observation of the practice in the selected outlets. The selected pharmaceutical outlets were visited at different times, the incidence and prevalence of selling and buying prescription required medication without prescription were observed and recorded.

The survey data was scientifically analysed and descriptive statistics were used to show the demographic and related characteristics of the study subjects and their responses to the survey questions. Thus, the survey and participant observation data constitute the main data sources for the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Not much exists on ethics and health care in particular and population and health generally, in the published research literature on the UAE. Raven (2002) discussed the intersection of healthcare organizational ethics, pointing out that healthcare providers are business organizations with ethical issues. Gulf News (2011c) discussed ethical issues surrounding doctors being remunerated by commission instead of salary, while Gulf News (2011b) reported warnings from health professionals regarding the sale of prescription medication over the counter.

National Newspaper (2011:1) pointed out the growing problems with waiting lists for various health procedures in the UAE while Yeboah (2007) examined population growth and the demand and provision of health services in the UAE up to 2006. He found that population growth was accompanied by new medical centers and increased number of public and private health services.

Yeboah (2005) compared reproductive health in the Gulf with the Caribbean, noting the vast improvements in maternal and child health in the UAE and GCC over the decades. Okaida (2003) examined mental health in the Arab world while Zufur (2003) focused on women empowerment in the Arab world. Burn et al. (1993) investigated variables concerning health in the UAE focusing on primary health care. They examined the 1986-1991 health strategy and concluded that health care had improved in the UAE. In addition, Matthew (2001) studied obesity in the UAE, indicating that there was a need to target obesity in the UAE. He concluded that obesity has a far greater impact in the UAE than acknowledged. UAE Ministry of Health (2001) presented professional code of conduct for health professionals, defining clearly what ethical practices were expected from medical practitioners and other health professionals. Ethical issues in health care have not received any attention in the published research literature on the UAE.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the geographical distribution of pharmaceutical outlets by geographical region in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. Consistent with the geographical distribution of pharmaceutical outlets in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, about 78.1% of the selected pharmaceutical outlets were in Abu Dhabi city, followed by Al Ain, 20.5%.

Table 1 Geographical distribution of pharmaceutical outlets

Locality/Region	Number of Outlets	% of total
Abu Dhabi City	57	78.1
Al Ain District	15	20.5
Western Hemisphere	1	1.4
Total	73	100

Source: Survey data

The study found that over the counter sale of prescription required medications was very endemic in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. All the pharmaceutical outlets observed actually sold medicines without the required prescription.

Distribution of customers

The study found that almost 65% of the customers interviewed were males compared with about 35% females. The age distribution was skewed towards the middle age groups, with the 25 -44 years age group recording the highest percentage of 42, followed by 65 years and over, 45-64 years, 15-24 years and <15 years..

The practice

The endemic practice of selling prescription required medicines over the counter has been documented by Yeboah (2013). With the exception of controlled medicines which require controlled medicine prescription form (special prescription form), virtually every medicine can be purchased in the UAE without prescription. Of the 73 outlets observed by Yeboah (2013), none asked for prescriptions for a number of prescription required medicines including antibiotics, Daonil, Metformin, Ex-forge HCT etc. The findings from Yeboah (2013) are corroborated by Gulf News (2011a) and Gulf News (2011b). For example, in recognition of the problem, Gulf News (2011a: 3) writes "People have been urged to consult their Doctors when taking medicines without prescription. This is because over the counter medicines can lead to organ failure or death".

Reasons given by buyers and sellers for the practice

Tables 2 and 3 identify the main reasons given by pharmacists and buyers respectively for selling and buying medicines without prescription. Two reasons stand out for pharmacists, namely "everybody is doing it" and "the next pharmacy will sell if I do not.

Table 2 Main reasons given by pharmacists for the practice

Reason	Number of Respondents	%
Everybody is doing it	73	100.0
Next pharmacy will sell if I don't	73	100.0
Customer satisfaction	68	93.2
Make more sales	29	39.7
Customers ask for it	70	95.9
Easy to sell without prescription	57	50.7

Source: Survey data

Table 3 shows that the overwhelming reason given by buyers is "easy to get what you want" (100), followed by "pharmacists don't mind" (96.9%), "all my friends are doing it" (70.2%) and "I have not had any harm or problem" (63.4%).

Table 3 Reasons given by buyers for the practice

Reason	Number of respondents	%
Pharmacists don't mind	127	96.9
All my friends are doing it	92	70.2
Easy to get what you want	131	100.0
No harm to my body so far	83	53.4
You save money by not going to the Doctor	18	13.7
You save time	59	45.0

Source: Survey Data

Pharmacists were also asked about potential strategies to address and a summary of their responses is presented in table 4,

Table 4 Responses to questions on strategies

Question	Yes	No
Will the practice stop if all pharmacists adopt the Ministry of Health professional code of conduct?	61	12
Do you agree that enforcement of the legislation on the sale of drug would eradicate the problem?	69	4
Would continuous education of pharmacists help eradicate the practice?	36	37
Would public education and other awareness campaigns reduce the prevalence of the practice?	42	31
Teenagers are buying medicines. Would you agree to a high school curriculum which includes the use of medicines and drugs?	38	35

Source: Survey data

STRATEGIES

On the basis of the reasons given for the over the counter sale of prescription medicines, a number of strategies are proposed in this study. They include; enforcement of the existing laws, enforcement of the pharmaceutical code of ethics and codes of conduct for the various health professions as developed by the health authorities, public awareness campaign, continuous education for pharmacies and more.

Health Authority Abu Dhabi has indicated that the existing legislation prohibits over the counter sale of prescription medicines in the Emirate. While the prevalence of the practice can be minimized through law enforcement, the study found that law enforcement personnel, notably the Police, could not be present at all pharmacies all the time.

A key strategy is the enforcement of the professional code of ethics for pharmacists. UAE Ministry of Health (2001) presented codes of conduct for all the major professions in the health industry. This study found that a rigid implementation and enforcement of the code of conduct for pharmacists was a sure way of minimizing the practice.

So also is a vigorous public education program. The study found that the practice is so endemic that public awareness campaign and other forms of public education are essential to achieve change. The study found further that, the thinking of the public in relation to buying medicines needed to change as shown from the responses in table 4. The study proposes further that the education should start with high school students because the study found children less than 15 years of age buying medicines without prescription. Yet another strategy adopted by the study is to introduction of Continuous Pharmaceutical Education (CPE) for pharmacists along the lines of Continuous Medical Education for Doctors (CME).

DISCUSSION

The numerous and diverse range of reasons given by all parties for over the counter selling and buying of drugs presupposes a need for a comprehensive approach to addressing the problem, as it is evident from the study results that one approach will not be successful in addressing the unethical problem. The first proposed feasible strategy is to change the existing mentality on ethics among pharmacists, especially those who indulge in over the counter sale of prescription only medication. In fact, the essence of moral reasoning (Seedhouse, 2003) cannot be overemphasized.

In Abu Dhabi, pharmacists are undertaking the functions of diagnosis, prescribing and dispensing at the same time. Pharmacists are not Doctors and what they are doing is not providing professional care, and patient safety and patient care are compromised. At best, when they diagnose, prescribe and dispense, they are only addressing the symptoms of the medical condition. The actual condition remains unattended to, placing patients at risk. For example, "a person experiencing a burning sensation and pain in his chest could have oesophageal reflux or a more serious heart related condition. When a pharmacist gives a painkiller, the person is being treated for the symptom not the condition" (Xpress paper, 2013: 3). Besides, the pharmacist would not know the medical history of the patient at the time, including pre-existing medical conditions and allergies. This practice is completely unethical and illegal. The standpoint taken in this study is that Pharmacists must think ethically or be made to do so through enforcement of the law and professional ethics.

A sure way of achieving success is to enforce the Code of Ethics for health professionals. Ethics is the heart of health care (Seedhouse, 2003; Yeboah, 2013) and there is always the expectation that health professionals will adopt and practice their professional code of ethics as well as general ethics in their duties. In the case of pharmacists selling drugs without prescription, the thinking that "everybody is doing it so the practice has to be perpetrated" has to change. So also is the thinking that the next pharmacist will sell if I don't. These two reasons were prominent in the reasons given by pharmacists for the practice. Thus, a comprehensive and thorough approach which would require all pharmacists to change their thinking is a must. The point is that no outlet will stop the practice if all other outlets do not stop.

The objective is to get all outlets to adopt a new practice of dispensing only if a prescription is presented. Besides, health authorities have responsibilities to enforce their own regulations and code of ethics. UAE Ministry of Health (2001) provided the code of ethics for the various health professions in the UAE. The point is that these codes of ethics have not been vigorously enforced, albeit this study argues that enforcement of the codes will yield desired results. After all, most of the survey pharmacists confirmed that an implementation of the UAE Ministry of Health Code of Conduct would help alleviate the problem (table 4).

Throughout the health care system, changes can be achieved through law enforcement, but more so in the pharmaceutical industry. Indeed, health authorities believe that the whole issue of selling prescription medicines over the counter is an enforcement issue and that it is up to the Police and other law enforcement agencies to enforce the existing law. As it stands, it is illegal to sell prescription required medicines without an authorized and appropriate prescription. The study found that a majority of pharmacists believed that the practice could be eliminated or reduced if the existing legislation is enforced. This article proposes an enforcement regime which involves rapid and unannounced visits to pharmacies by law enforcement agencies. The agents only have to observe and bring up charges against those pharmacies and their employees who break the law.

There is some evidence that the Police are willing to act in the case of controlled medicines. Controlled medicines, accordingly to the law, can only be dispensed on the submission of a special prescription form called "Controlled Medicine Prescription Form". Only medical specialists (not all medical officers) have legal authority to complete these forms and only in their fields of specializations. A case in point is the arrest of staff of a pharmacy by Abu Dhabi Police for selling controlled medicine to an undercover officer following a tip off from the public, while working at a pharmacy, she sold medicines without asking for prescription (Gulf News, 2011b).

Given the endemic nature of the problem, it is the standpoint of the study that a potentially effective education program involving the inclusion of drugs and related issues in the school curriculum. As it might take a generational change to eradicate the problem, students at high school and higher levels in the educational continuum should be taught lessons on the illegality and dangers of the practice and its associated penalties. The attention of the students should also be drawn to the potential harm from buying and using prescription medicines without a Doctor's supervision or advice. The fact is that the study found people as young as 15 years buying medicines over the counter. The study believes further that the practice is so rife among the current generation that any efforts at eradicating the practice should give serious consideration to the younger generation.

Another effective strategy is designing and implementing a nationwide public awareness campaign to draw the attention of Nationals and Expatriates to the dangers and educate the general public not to buy and use medicines without medical supervision. It is evident from the study results that most users of pharmaceutical product were not aware of the harm that could potentially emerge. A good general public education through awareness

campaign, advertised information in both print and non-print media and public lectures would help minimize the incidence and prevalence of the over the counter sale of prescription medicines.

This study advocates the development and implementation of continuous education for all pharmacists along the lines of Continuous Medical Education (CME) for Doctors. This will allow pressing ethical and related issues to be drawn to the attention of pharmacists. It will also serve to remind pharmacists of their duty of professional care and the need to adopt and practice their professional code of ethics. Most of the responding pharmacists did not argue against adopting and practicing a strict regime of ethics, but were afraid their colleagues would not do the same.

This, by and large, corroborates the urgent need to strive to implement a comprehensive and integrated approach to solving the problem. For any measure to work successfully, all pharmacists would have to stop the unethical practice and this must be clearly seen by all.

In view of the facts, pharmaceutical companies must establish a balance between business ethics and professional ethics, albeit the large number of outlets defeats this as it creates fierce competition. As noted by Raven (2002), the intersection of health care, business ethics and professional ethics is very important in this country, and health care providers such as pharmacies have an obligation to adopt the highest ethical standards (see also Seedhouse, 2003: 117). Ethics is the heart of health care and no health care system would meet the expectations of its beneficiaries without adequate ethical practices. Besides, pharmacists have accepted their professional code of ethics that includes providing the best care to their clients. The best care cannot be provided under these circumstances of selling prescription medicines over the counter.

CONCLUSION

The population of the UAE has increased rapidly since the federation was formed. With the increase in population have come great strides in health care development. The study concludes that the great advances made in medicine, medical practices and health care in the UAE have been accompanied by undesired and unethical health care practices. The standpoint taken in the study is that the over the counter sale of prescription medication is so widespread that drastic measures are required to eradicate the problems and ameliorate the situation. The study concludes further that a comprehensive approach, involving a combination of strategies, would be required to address the unethical health care practice. The study proposes a number of strategies which have potential to reduce the prevalence of unethical health care practices in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, including enforcement of existing legislation, enforcement of professional code of ethics, and public education.

Ethics as noted elsewhere in this article is the heart of health care. The study believes further that a certain degree of ethical consideration and practice is essential for successful health care delivery. It is this study's conclusion that pharmaceutical care providers need to recognize and accept not only the ethics of their organizations, but also professional ethics as applicable to their chosen profession.

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