

Community Pharmacy Practice in Nepal- An Underexploited Healthcare Domain

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Community pharmacy professionals-the most accessible and affordable health service providers- can contribute to healthcare delivery through providing drug information; manage and monitor medication; and deliver activities to prevention and promotion of health.¹⁻⁴ In developed countries, competent community pharmacists facilitate the acute and chronic disease management.⁵⁻⁷ In Nepal, however, despite the immense scope, community pharmacy resource largely remains untapped; the expansion of their services requires understanding and addressing the following key challenges:

1. Inadequate qualification and competency of the service providers: Community pharmacies - commonly termed as 'ausadhi pasal' ('medicine shop') - are operated by either (a) pharmacists with a four-year undergraduate degree in pharmacy; or (b) pharmacy assistants with a two-year intermediate course in pharmacy; or (c) 'professional persons' with few weeks to a month's basic course in medicine dispensing'.^{8,9} Majority of community pharmacy workforce comprises of the 'professional persons'; and, only a limited number of pharmacists are involved in the community pharmacy sector.⁹

To safeguard public health, community pharmacy workforce should be well-trained. Knowledge gaps have been documented across all types of community pharmacy service providers in Nepal.¹⁰ Inadequately trained community pharmacy professionals pose major challenges such as: sell medicine without prescriptions, sell inappropriate medicines or in inappropriate doses, and delay referral of patients.^{11,12} Basic and refresher training programs should be institutionalized to build the capacity and confidence of pharmacists and pharmacy assistants. Equally important is to strengthen the knowledge and skills of the 'professional persons' considering the shortages of pharmacists and the fact that 'professional persons' are already providing majority of the pharmacy services.

2. Limited services offered by community pharmacies: In Nepal, the services offered by the community pharmacies is limited to dispensing prescriptions with a basic instruction on when to take the medicines (time of the day; and before or after food).¹³ There is an unexplored potential to expanding the health services; for example: offering a medication therapy or health promotion services.

3. Inadequate monitoring and regulation of the services provided by community pharmacies: The Department of Drug Administration (DDA), the national regulatory authority's monitoring of the pharmacies is limited to checking certification, medications expiry and storage. The DDA seldom monitors the quality of services. It is therefore necessary to set criteria and establish mechanisms to regulate the quality of the community pharmacy services.

4. Poor acknowledgement of community pharmacy services as healthcare service: Pharmacies are perceived as profit making business rather than professional healthcare provider, with low level of trust among general public.¹³ While community pharmacy professionals are a significant part of healthcare in the developed world; health care delivery from community pharmacies is still a farfetched idea in Nepal. Although the 'business' aspect of community pharmacy cannot be disregarded, pharmacy staff can and should be acknowledged as a service-oriented health care provider. Health care providers, primarily doctors should acknowledge that competent pharmacy workforce can positively impact patients' health and thereby share the health care burden. Making this shift in perception requires substantial efforts to bridge the gap between the pharmacy service providers and other health care practitioners.

Strengthening the skills and capacity of community pharmacies will address the healthcare human resource shortage in Nepal. With over ten thousand retail traditional and allopathic medicine outlets, community pharmacies are the most accessible and affordable healthcare providers to delivering quality health care services.¹⁴ It is time that community pharmacy services in Nepal are expanded beyond 'medication selling' and build trust in the community by delivering quality services with a collaborative effort from members of the healthcare fraternity.

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