

FEATURES

MAKING INROADS IN MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS



LEANNE PHILPOTT 08/04/2022



Whether it's simply asking, "Are you ok?", making a referral, or optimising therapy, pharmacists can be the custodians of their patients' mental wellbeing

According to the National Health Survey, one in five (20%) Australians aged 16-85 have a mental health condition. During their lifetime, almost half (46%) of all Australians will experience a mental disorder.

Among the most common mental illnesses in Australia are anxiety, depression and substance abuse disorder.

Over the last decade, numerous studies have shown pharmacy is well-placed to support people's mental wellbeing. As we know, pharmacists' role in mental health is underpinned by their accessibility and competency to refer.

Furthermore, medications, often used in conjunction with cognitive behaviour therapy or psychotherapy, play a key role in the treatment of many mental illnesses. Indeed, in 2019-20 there were 40.7 million prescriptions filled for mental health-related medications in Australia. This is an increase from the 22 million prescriptions filled in 2010-11.

Antidepressants and antipsychotics are the most commonly prescribed medicines, with most prescriptions (82.7%) coming from GPs as opposed to psychiatrists (7.3%).

This demonstrates the frequency of contact people with a mental illness can have with their pharmacy.'

There is also greater awareness of the link between mental and physical health. Individuals with a chronic illness are at increased risk of developing a mental health condition and vice versa. Research shows that 28% of people with a chronic physical condition also have a mental health condition.

People living with chronic pain are four times more likely to suffer from depression than those without pain.

It's now well established that people living with mental illness have higher rates of mortality; they die on average 20 years earlier than people without mental illness and evidence shows this gap is widening.

Research shows people with severe mental illness are six times more likely to die of cardiovascular disease, four times more likely to die from respiratory disease and two to four times more likely to die from infectious diseases.

Recognising pharmacy's role

Back in 2014, the Mental Health and Community Pharmacy Project led by researchers at Griffith University, showed pharmacists are capable and well-placed to identify and support people with mental illness to achieve better health outcomes from their medication.

Project leader Professor Amanda Wheeler tells the *AJP*, "The pilot study was really about pharmacists implementing a medicine support service for people with highly prevalent mental disorders, such as depression and anxiety, and it demonstrated this was a useful intervention.

“Consumers appreciated the service and pharmacists were able to deliver it and it made a real difference to those people living with depression and anxiety. Not only in terms of their medicines, but also with regard to other health issues they were experiencing.

“Having a trusted health professional check in on them regularly and keep them on track with their medication was a huge support and it really demonstrated what community pharmacy can do in this area.”

More recently, Prof Wheeler co-led (alongside Dr Claire O’Reilly from the University of Sydney) the Bridging the Gap Between Physical and Mental Illness in Community Pharmacy (PharMIbridge) research project, funded through the Sixth Community Pharmacy Agreement.

“This project, which focused on people experiencing severe and persistent mental illness, started in March 2020 and finished at the end of last year. It demonstrated that community pharmacies have the skills to effectively engage and work with participants in the area of mental health. It also recognises that mental health consumers want to engage with someone.

“However, participating in the study throughout the pandemic became very difficult. Pharmacists had many pressures from additional services, including the roll-out of the COVID vaccination program and the provision of boosters.

“Despite these challenges, the pharmacies managed to retain the participants. Their willingness and motivation to continue with the study showcases their fortitude and resilience. Particularly as there were 4 weeks last year when all four of our trial regions were in lockdown and yet the pharmacies maintained regular communication with participants. This was done via telephone or email, as well as scheduling face-to-face appointment with them as soon as they could.”

In the past, factors such as time and training have been identified as barriers preventing pharmacies from playing a greater role in mental healthcare.

Prof Wheeler says, “The barrier of time will always be there until more of these new services become remunerated. However, during our study pharmacies had so many different things they had to deliver and yet they still managed to maintain many of their existing services and continue with the project.

“Programs such as Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) and the take-up of this training has really addressed barriers relating to knowledge and education. This has also had a flow-on effect in terms of stigma. If consumers know a pharmacy has staff trained as Mental Health First Aiders, it becomes a safe place to have those conversations.

“It gives pharmacists and their support staff more confidence to ask questions and perform those check-ins. Working with people who are distressed and assisting them to seek support when they need it has been a really important step that community pharmacy has embraced.”

Screening and intervention

In the UK and USA, studies have shown that GPs perform depression screening in only 30% of adults with chronic illness and 15% of adults without chronic illness, contributing to the under-diagnosis and under-treatment of depression.

Studies in Australia highlight an opportunity for pharmacists to play a greater role in screening and risk assessment for mental health using tools such as the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ), Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) or the WHO-5 Well-being Index.

Dr Claire O'Reilly, lecturer at the University of Sydney Pharmacy School, explains, "A few years back we did a feasibility study that demonstrated that pharmacists are certainly capable of screening and referring people at risk of depression. However, even if pharmacists are not taking a formal approach to mental health care, they may still be doing it in a more anecdotal way.

"For example, it might come up in conversation as part of a product request for an herbal supplement to assist sleep. Or maybe you're chatting about a chronic disease diagnosis, and you realise no one's talked to them about the risk of depression."

Dr Stephen Carbone, CEO of Prevention United—a charity focusing on the prevention of mental disorders—says pharmacists are on the frontline when it comes to supporting people with chronic illness who may be at risk of depression, and that there are simple questions that can form part of a basic screening.

"Firstly, over the last two weeks have you been bothered by feeling down, depressed or hopeless? Secondly, during the past month have you found that things or activities you previously enjoyed now give you little or no pleasure?"

"It's just about asking do you feel okay, do you feel a bit down, have you lost interest in things since you had your heart attack or heart problems?"

"If someone comes into the pharmacy claiming a whole range of psychosomatic symptoms, rather than just taking them on face value ask yourself if it could be depression. If you think it's plausible, you might gently explore with some basic questions."

"Pharmacists are in a unique position in that they get to know many of their customers quite well, so can look out for non-verbal cues in people's demeanor," he said. "Are they looking down cast, do they appear not to be taking such good care of themselves? Maybe the person is less chatty than usual, or they seem withdrawn. If you notice a change or you simply have a gut feeling, that can be enough of a reason to have the conversation."

Prof Wheeler adds, "Some pharmacies will not be able to provide such a wide array of professional services due to space limitations or staffing amongst other factors.

“Similarly, not all community pharmacies will be able to offer a mental health medication review service necessarily, but that doesn’t mean they can’t play an important role in this area. Performing check-ins with people and knowing the support services in your local area is also valuable.

“This is a population that might have been taking medications for some time. However, this doesn’t mean they’re not going to benefit from a medicines review. It’s about having the confidence to start the conversation, but certainly performing a MedsCheck is a good opportunity to do this.”



A pharmacy in action: mental health support

“The frequency of mental health-related enquiries we receive in the pharmacy has definitely increased since the start of the pandemic,” says pharmacist David Tran, Blooms the Chemist Padstow, NSW.

“The most common conditions we’re seeing are anxiety, stress and panic disorders. Particularly during the second lockdown, when we were rolling out the COVID vaccine I recall a few people saying they were experiencing fear of being in crowded places.

“Amongst the more senior population we have seen cases of mild depression, particularly as Padstow was identified as a local government area hotspot for COVID cases, so we could only travel within a 5km radius of our homes.

“Being on the frontline, pharmacists are in an ideal position to engage the segment of the community where people haven’t taken that step to seek help. I believe in training our pharmacy staff to understand the mild signs and symptoms, as well as to recognise the information our customers might share that may call for a deeper discussion about mental health.

“Rather than taking a formal approach we tend to look out for the signs of symptoms and then apply our skills based on the person’s individual’s needs. For example, we’ve had people who come in with

weight issues or dietary problems, as well customers who come in for sleeping tablets and often it's these types of health concerns that may lead to a health check.

“At Blooms we offer the Healthy Mind Checkup. As part of this service our staff were trained to understand the signs and symptoms of mental health problems. We also have pharmacists who have their Mental Health First Aid certificate, and this has deepened their knowledge and helped build their confidence to have that conversation.

“The Healthy Mind Checkup helps us to recognise at which stage the person is at and the severity of their condition. We can then link them up with a relevant healthcare professional or allied service.

“We have a directory of all the helplines that area available for various ages and genders. Locally, we've reached out to charities such as St Vincent De Paul, as sometimes it's financial stress that brings about mental health issues; particularly during the pandemic with some people unable to work or leave their local government area to access their workplace due to imposed restrictions.

“We've also partnered with the Gidget Foundation to drive awareness of postnatal depression. We have a baby weighing service instore and this provides us with an opportunity to identify the signs or symptoms and assist in this area.

Don't forget the kids: children's mental health

According to the Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing 2013–14, an estimated 14% of children experience a mental disorder. Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (7.4%), anxiety disorders (6.9%) and major depressive disorder (2.8%) were among the most common mental health issues.

However, a poll conducted by the Royal Children's Hospital (2017) revealed that only 35% of parents are confident they could identify the signs of a mental health problem in their child. In addition, only 44% of parents said they would be confident in knowing where to seek help.

This highlights the need to educate and support parents to recognise the early warning signs and seek the appropriate help. Signs of mental health problems in children can be emotional, physical or social.

Cues to watch out for include:

- Behavioural changes (tantrums, defiant or aggressive behaviour)
- Emotional upset
- Shows signs of worry
- Displays signs of separation anxiety from a parent or carer

- Regresses (i.e., starts bed wetting again or thumb sucking)
- Becomes unusually restless or has difficulties paying attention
- Difficulty sleeping
- Loss of appetite
- Complains of physical pain without a clear medical cause
- Withdraws socially

Of course, many of these symptoms sound like the normal ups and downs of childhood, which makes it incredibly difficult for parents to distinguish between ‘normal’ behaviour and the onset of an emerging mental health concern.

A useful resource for pharmacists to direct parents to is the Raising Children Network’s Raising Healthy Minds app. The free app is designed by experts to promote children’s social and emotional wellbeing, allowing parents, carers and professionals to check on a child’s development and behaviour, or get helpful information based on the child’s age.

Raising Children Network director Derek McCormack tells the *AJP*, “As one of the first ports-of-call and a regular presence in the community for many parents and carers, pharmacists are well-placed to be able to talk about mental health issues. The Raising Healthy Minds app is a valuable tool pharmacists could use as a reference themselves, or as a resource to offer to parents and carers who might benefit from ongoing support for their family’s mental health and wellbeing.

“With pharmacists on the frontline of providing care in the community, introducing the Raising Healthy Minds app to clients could prove to be a conversation-starter to connect with people who might need some parenting support or reassurance to ensure their child or children are thriving socially and emotionally.

“The free Raising Healthy Minds app can be downloaded from Google Play and the App Store.”

Previous

Health minister elevated

Next

How will full scope look?

Related Posts



13 Reasons Why



How to save a life



Clinical tips: mental health
