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Title: A qualitative study of community pharmacists' clinical decision-making skills

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Introductory line

In recent years, self-care has been in the forefront of UK health policy ^[1], with community pharmacies being promoted as a first point of contact for patients ^[2], when seeking advice for the treatment of a variety of conditions and minor ailments. As more medicines have become available without prescription this has led to community pharmacists dealing with a wider range of presenting problems and spending more time on making clinical decisions.

Aims / objectives

The area of how community pharmacists make a clinical diagnosis is under-researched. The aim of this exploratory study was to gain an initial insight on how community pharmacists make clinical decisions in order to reach a diagnosis.

Method

A qualitative methodology was employed where semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with community pharmacists that had been practicing for at least six months at the time of the interviews and did not hold, or were working towards, a prescribing qualification. Pharmacists were identified through snow balling sampling and consent sheets sent to their pharmacies' registered address. Pharmacists who returned completed consent forms were recruited to the study. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed ad verbatim. Interviews were analysed, with a team-based approach, using a clinical reasoning based framework analysis to identify themes and subthemes. Ethical approval was granted by the ethics committee at the University of Wolverhampton.

Results

Eight interviews were conducted across England, with five male and three female pharmacists, who had been practicing for periods ranging from one to forty years. The major theme that emerged from the analysis was the poor diagnostic knowledge and ability of the pharmacists and a non-evidence based approach to decision-making. Pharmacists constantly used and overly relied on mnemonic methods both for diagnostic purposes and product selection. Their motives within consultations appeared to be establishing an appropriate product to recommend, rather than the need to establish a diagnosis, and the inability to differentiate between the two processes. However, they did have a sense of the limitations of the methods they used and an awareness for the need to 'delve deeper' during consultations but could not articulate how or why this was the case. Themes and sub-themes are explained using confirmatory quotes from the data.

Discussion or Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that even though community pharmacists are tasked with advising symptom-presenting patients, their poor clinical reasoning skills are preventing them from reaching appropriate diagnoses. In order for community pharmacists to better perform this role, greater emphasis should be given in teaching and practicing clinical reasoning skills during their studies and through continuous professional development. The study is limited by its small sample size.

1. Department of Health. The NHS Plan. A Plan for Investment, A Plan for Reform [Internet]. London: National Health Service; 2000 [cited 6 October 2012]. Available from: http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/www.dh.gov.uk/en/publicationsandstatistics/publications/publicationspolicyandguidance/dh_4002960

2. Royal Pharmaceutical Society. Improving Urgent and Emergency care through better use of pharmacists [Internet]; 2014 [cited 5 October 2016]. Available from: <http://www.rpharms.com/policy-pdfs/urgent-and-emergency-care.pdf>