



The Pharmacy
Guild of Australia

Response to Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee Inquiry into Suicide in Australia.

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National Secretariat

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Introduction

The Pharmacy Guild of Australia (the Guild) is an employers' organisation servicing the needs of independent community pharmacies. It strives to promote, maintain and support community pharmacies as the most appropriate primary providers of health care to the community through optimum therapeutic use of medicines, medicines management and related services.

The Guild welcomes the opportunity to respond to the inquiry into Suicide in Australia by the Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee. This inquiry is to review the impact of suicide on the Australian community, including high risk groups such as indigenous youth and rural communities.

The Guild have responded only to those aspects of the terms of reference of the Inquiry where we believe community pharmacy could be engaged to achieve improved coordination and delivery of comprehensive mental health care services.

The submission outlines the role of community pharmacy in the prevention of suicide (or self-harm) with a particular focus on those with an identified mental illness such as depression. This paper also explores the role of community pharmacy as an early point of contact and referral point to GP and mental health care services.

Role of community pharmacy

Community pharmacy offers a highly accessible network of primary health care providers providing quality advice and service. Community pharmacies exist in well spread out and accessible locations and often operate over extended hours seven days a week in urban, rural and remote areas. There are over 5,000 community pharmacies in Australia and on average, there are more than 14 visits to a community pharmacy per year for each man, woman and child in Australia, across metropolitan, rural and remote community settings. That is approximately 300 million occasions each year on which pharmacists are able to provide professional advice and service. Hence, this network of pharmacies is an important referral gateway for people in the community with mental illness or risk of suicide (or self-harm).

Community pharmacists regularly come into contact with and are able to engage effectively with high-risk groups of people, such as people with depression or mental illness. In many cases the community pharmacist is the principle primary care health provider that a person encounters on a regular basis, particularly in rural and regional areas.

Community pharmacies are ideally placed to provide services especially for rural populations. The community pharmacists have the opportunity to develop close relationships with members of the community and to observe any developing social and/or medical problems. In such circumstances, the pharmacist is well placed to intervene to provide advice and assistance to avoid a more serious condition/situation developing. In many cases, it is through the community pharmacist's intervention that consumers make an appointment to see a general practitioner (GP). In the context of mental health, this service by community pharmacists can

be of enormous value. While this service is available at all community pharmacies across Australia, it is particularly important in regional and rural areas where the pharmacy may be the only primary health care provider available in the local community.

Community pharmacists have the potential to play an enhanced role in the primary care of patients identified as a suicide (or self-harm) risk by assisting with prevention and early intervention programs and contributing to research.

Primary health care coordination

Many people at risk of suicide (or self-harm) live independently in the community, accessing services through primary health care. For many people with mental health issues, there is an associated stigma which may deter them from seeking help or support. Community pharmacies are seen to be socially acceptable, reducing the stigma associated with seeking help. Community pharmacists are able to provide services that are responsive to an individual's needs. They are key partners with other health care providers, service users and carers in the delivery of effective health care. Community pharmacists can work with other health professionals to provide a continuum of care to improve long-term outcomes for those living in the community with mental illness or risk of suicide (or self-harm).

In the course of providing a professional service to their patients, community pharmacists liaise with a range of health professionals located in their region. For rural pharmacists this is a particularly important role, since community pharmacies often become the focal point for the community in seeking reliable advice and referral, particularly in towns without a hospital or a doctor.

Quality Use of Medicines

Quality Use of Medicines (QUM) is one of the four pillars of Australia's National Medicines Policy. QUM means:

- selecting management options wisely;
- choosing suitable medicines, if a medicine is considered necessary; and
- using medicines safely and effectively¹

Medicines are an important component of follow-up care for people who have been identified as being at risk of suicide (or self-harm), particularly those with depression or mental illness. These people often have multiple co-morbidities and may be on complicated medicine regimens, which often have high level side effects and potential interactions with other medications.

¹ National Prescribing Service: About Quality Use of Medicines (www.nps.org.au)

Community pharmacists are ideally placed to support the quality use of medicines and provide a number of support services, such as:

- medicine management following discharge from hospital;
- providing information and education on all aspects of drug therapy;
- treatment adherence strategies (e.g. dose administration aids²);
- identifying and addressing common adverse effects of medicines;
- staged supply for people at risk of over-dosing;
- facilitating the transfer of information about medicines between care providers; and
- supporting GPs and other health teams in the treatment by monitoring medication use.

Medicine profiling

Community pharmacies have detailed histories of the medicines dispensed in their pharmacy for their regular patients, whether the medicines are prescribed by a GP or specialist. People with mental health issues at risk of suicide (or self-harm) may often move between care settings such as hospital and their own home and it is critical that the health provider at the time has access to the person's medicine history. Many community pharmacies can provide identified regular patients with medicine profiles that lists the current prescription, over-the-counter (OTC) and complementary medicines that person is taking. Not only do these medicine profiles help the person better understand their medicines, but they provide an effective communication tool for the person when they move between care settings.

Home Medicines Review

Support can also be provided as part of a Home Medicines Review (HMR) currently performed by accredited pharmacists. Community pharmacies currently work in consultation with GPs to provide HMRs for people with complex needs within the community setting. The HMR service helps avoid or identify and address medicine-related problems and optimises medicine use.

Staged supply

Staged supply is when a community pharmacist supplies dispensed medicines in instalments (typically daily) to a patient, usually on request from a GP. Many community pharmacists currently provide professional support services such as staged supply and/or dose administration aids to people with mental health issues who have been identified as being a suicide (or self-harm) risk. As part of a post-discharge strategy for patients identified as being at-risk of suicide (or self-harm), the community pharmacist should be involved in monitoring and supporting that person's management and use of medicines. The community pharmacist, in collaboration with the GP may also be able to coordinate arrangements for staged supply for people that have been particularly identified as being at-risk of over-dosage.

² Dose administration aids are blister packs or sachets where a person's medicines are organised (usually as a week's supply) according to the daily dose schedule.

Medication Information

Community pharmacists provide patients with Consumer Medicine Information (CMIs) which contains information on the safe and effective use of a medicine. The CMI is based on the Product Information (PI) but is written specifically for consumers. CMI are available for most prescription and some non-prescription medicines.

There is a wealth of information available on the internet and other sources, some of which is inaccurate or misleading. Community pharmacists are able to provide accurate information to patients to ensure they are well informed and supported.

Complementary Medicines

Some people may seek to use a natural remedy, such as St John's Wart, before seeking professional advice; the pharmacist is ideally placed to make an assessment on whether referral to GP is necessary.

Health promotion

Community pharmacists can have a key role to play in promotional activities to increase awareness of mental health issues and suicide (or self-harm) risk. Community pharmacists can help to raise awareness of such health issues by providing awareness materials such as promotional leaflets or fact sheets. Distribution of information materials through community pharmacies provides the Australian community with easy access to important mental health and suicide (or self-harm) prevention information with the opportunity to seek further advice from a highly trained health professional.

Community pharmacy can also provide valuable public awareness services such as provision of information on services available to at-risk people and family members.

Carer support

Community pharmacists also have frequent contact with carers and can enhance this role by supporting the carer's understanding and management of the medicines for the person under their care. This may involve providing information about the benefits, interactions or side-effects of the medicines or supporting the carer with adherence aids such as medicine profiles or dose administration aids. Community pharmacists can often advise carers about other local support mechanisms in place to assist them in caring for their charges, whether it is local mental health service centres or health and community centres that can offer respite or additional home care.

Conclusion

A review of literature clearly shows that there is strong evidence across a number of settings for the effectiveness of pharmaceutical care services, continuity of care services post-hospital discharge and pharmacist education services for improving patient outcomes on medicine use. There is sound evidence that when pharmacists implement continuity of care services post hospital discharge, which include active follow-up for high-risk patients, this leads to reduced hospital re-admission, reduced numbers of medicine related problems and improved medicine knowledge and adherence.³

A multidisciplinary approach involving community pharmacy will help improve the coordination of services and focus effort on the development and provision of services that will significantly impact on improving the care of people at risk of suicide (or self-harm). This will also benefit families. The key benefit of this approach will be the assistance to individuals to recover and be better integrated in the general community.

The Guild believes that there is still a lack of recognition and understanding by many health professionals about the essential role and contribution of community pharmacy within the primary health care sector. Community pharmacy is often a forgotten resource that could be better engaged and utilised by Government and by other health care providers in implementing community-based health programs and providing primary health care services in order to increase the benefits for individuals and the community. An opportunity exists to more effectively utilise the expertise and knowledge of community pharmacists in assisting the care and management of people with mental health issues at risk of suicide (or self harm), particularly in rural Australia.

³ Dr L.Roughhead, Dr S.Semple, Dr A.Vitry: The Value of Professional Pharmacist Services in the Community Setting A systematic review of the literature 1990-2002; www.guild.org.au