

Improving the image of pharmacists



PUBLIC RELATIONS BEGINS AT HOME

July 15, 1996

Pharmacy practice has a unique need for public relations because it is an occupation in transition. Pharmacists do not want to be limited to their traditional drug product handling function. Although a new role — helping people make the best use of medications — has been well articulated, pharmacists need public understanding and support in order to move in that direction. That understanding and support can be built through good communications about the capabilities of pharmacists and the health needs they are prepared to address. This is the essence of the public relations imperative facing pharmacy.

How should that imperative be pursued? Some pharmacists advocate a central-planning approach, with national organizations designing and carrying out public relations programs. However, even the most lavishly funded campaign will be a mere whisper in the breeze if it is conceptualized as “let national headquarters do it.” The largest impact will come from the accumulated efforts of individual pharmacists who tell the profession’s story. If a few pharmacists in every community were dedicated to doing a good job of public relations on behalf of the profession, there would be little need for a national campaign.

Many pharmacists feel insecure about the level of service in their own practice settings, and this makes them reluctant to speak out on behalf of the profession. National organizations face a similar situation in that pharmaceutical care is not a concept that most people have experienced. The essential message that pharmacists and their organizations must convey to the public is this: Pharmacists are in the process of changing the focus of their work; we want you to understand where we are headed and why. This message has the greatest force and believability when it is conveyed to individuals by pharmacists who have helped them with medication-related problems.

Acute care pharmacists have been especially reticent in public relations. Perhaps this is because they believe that the biggest factor shaping the image of the profession is the behavior of community pharmacists. This is a self-defeating attitude, and

it must change. In the spirit of stimulating that change, below are 10 things that hospital practitioners can do to help create a new picture of the pharmacist in the public eye.

1. Make sure that the services of pharmacists are included in the institution's orientation materials for patients. I have made it a practice to read such material in the hospitals I visit, and it has been disappointing to frequently find no mention of pharmacists or the pharmacy department.
2. In all patient contacts, ensure that the patient knows you are a pharmacist. This can be achieved through a name badge, professional calling cards, and carefully chosen phrases dropped into a conversation.
3. Talk to hospitalized patients about their medications. Use a systematic and logical approach to pursuing this opportunity. Give patients your business card and invite calls with any follow-up questions.
4. When you counsel patients being discharged from the hospital about their medications, review briefly how pharmacists contributed to their care during the hospital stay.
5. During discharge consultation, offer to call the patient's community pharmacist if the patient is concerned about any matter that is best handled by that practitioner.
6. Every time you intervene to improve the treatment of an ambulatory patient, tell the patient what you have done and why.
7. In your dealings with institutional authorities, reiterate often that pharmacists are highly educated professionals who have untapped potential in patient care.
8. Bring to the attention of upper management scholarly literature that demonstrates problems in medication use; make reasonable extrapolations from that literature to your own practice environment. Point out what pharmacists can do to ameliorate these potential problems in your setting.
9. Convene your pharmacy department colleagues for the purpose of developing an assertive, coordinated action plan for pursuing a local public relations agenda. Engage the assistance of the hospital's public relations director. Report your activities in the pharmacy literature and at pharmacy meetings.
10. Develop well-rehearsed comments you can use in social situations to paint a picture of what pharmacists aspire to become. In talking with people who are uninitiated to modern pharmacy, I have often found that they become enthusiastic about the prospect of developing a professional relationship with a practicing pharmacist who cares about their health.

These are simple ideas. You will find it easy to improve on the list and customize it to your particular situation. Can you muster the will and make the time to act on these ideas? The survival of our profession depends on it. Public relations begins at home.

