



## Ethical Dilemmas Faced by Pharmacists in Decision-Making Related to Medication Therapy

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### Abstract

Ethical practice is a foundational value of pharmacists and the pharmacy profession. The therapeutic outcome of a treatment regimen that a patient receives could be influenced by the ethical judgment and decision-making of the pharmacist. During medication therapy management, the pharmacist is often required to perform functions that may bear on ethical concerns. Unfortunately, sometimes there is a conflict of values, or wedges narrow the pharmacist's power to act upon these concerns. Pharmacists usually operate in a world of gray zones that straddle the boundaries between therapeutic and nontherapeutic effects. There is some guidance available for describing and analyzing ethical issues faced by physicians, yet there is none specific to pharmacy. (Norris, 2022)

Pharmacists often do not have to find their own ethical bearings and use resources designed for other health professionals to support their ethical decision-making; nevertheless, such assistance may not include some of the specific contexts where pharmacists operate. This paper will define the role of ethical judgment and decision-making by means of a questionnaire, generated from applicable policy documents and guidelines, which discuss problems and dilemmas in making decisions about drug therapy, clinical pharmacist responsibility, patient autonomy, confidential information, gift-taking, and ethical judgments regarding others in a pharmacy setting. (Cox, 2021)



**Keywords-** Pharmacist, Pharmacy, Ethical conflict, Decision-making, Medication therapy.

## **1. Introduction to Ethical Decision-Making in Pharmacy Practice**

Ethical decision-making is generally characterized by moral dilemmas often involving conflicts of values or principles. In the healthcare profession, moral dilemmas are prevalent when making life and death decisions, assessing the quality of life, analyzing discontinuous care, and making decisions related to medications. The field of pharmacy is a respected and ever-changing, growing profession. However, with the increasing number of medications available, the rising number of individuals seeking drug therapy, the impressive and at times overpowered pharmaceutical industry, and the current emphasis on cost containment, pharmacists are faced with many new and exciting opportunities, and unfortunately, new and challenging responsibilities. An emphasis on technical aspects of drug therapy, a desire for prestige, and fear of compensation limitations has led to much debate about the professional responsibility and effectiveness of the pharmacist in preventing medication therapy problems versus the role of the pharmacist in selling and dispensing the product. (Cox, 2021)

## **2. Legal and Ethical Frameworks in Pharmacy Practice**

Legal and ethical guidance are provided by a complex regulatory environment that prescribes appropriate behavior based on beliefs and social attitudes. Legal and ethical frameworks regulate how individuals and institutions behave and adhere to established norms and legal rules. Laws that regulate the practice of pharmacists in the U.S. generally define the pharmacy profession and set out a regulatory framework for overseeing all aspects of its organization and operation. These laws describe the scope of pharmacy practice, the qualifications of pharmacists, and how prescription and non-prescription drugs are dispensed at state and federal levels. Licensing, competency, and accountability for malpractice are explained within the constraints of federal law. Most states have a pharmacy act that deals with licensing, registration, and required educational standards for pharmacists, and some states require that pharmacists regularly undergo professional development processes to maintain licensure. Similarly, ethical guidance for healthcare professionals is established through accepted value systems, norms, and standards commonly recognized by a given group or profession. Ethical standards provide day-to-day operational principles to guide practitioners, and they also provide legal regulation. Like other healthcare professionals, pharmacists must adhere to ethical norms and values in all professional activities. Professional ethics is distinct because it describes the close relationship between individual pharmacists, their clients, and the healthcare profession as a whole. A professional code of ethics for pharmacists articulates those important ethical leadership expectations for pharmacists that are both universally acknowledged and enduring. The performance expectations of the code provide a foundation for the professional practice standards that pharmacists must meet. (Berlinger et al.2020)



## **2.1. Regulatory Bodies and Guidelines**

In many countries, pharmacists are among a group of key healthcare providers involved in medication therapy and its management, and they often represent the first point of contact for patients needing medical advice and guidance. Regulation and familiarity with relevant guidelines are important in guiding behavior. Moreover, the concept of duty does not exist in a vacuum. Thus, how individuals are expected to behave is influenced by the rules of conduct, or the so-called deontological ethics embodied in the laws and guidelines of a country. Their titles, responsibilities, and rights, as well as the rules governing the profession, are usually defined and protected by the regulatory body of a country. Professional pharmacy organizations and trade associations often also have ethical guidelines. These guidelines seldom set the limits of ethical behavior, but they guide the moral reasoning of individuals, particularly in unclear situations. Such guidelines also often include elements of good conduct and practice, and their violation may result in disciplinary action, such as suspension, censure, or revocation of a license. (Ferreri et al.2020)

## **3. Patient Autonomy and Informed Consent**

Respect for patient autonomy is a fundamental ethical principle in health care and should be respected in all health care settings, including the pharmacy. This is because autonomy is essential to human flourishing, and the decisions people make reveal and fashion their characters and are fundamental to the future they will be able to create for themselves. Respect for patient autonomy has specifically been recognized as one of five key ethical principles in health care, which should inform pharmacy practice. These principles include: (i) Beneficence – acting in the best interest of the patient as a health care provider; (ii) autonomy – allowing patients to make decisions for themselves; (iii) non-maleficence – avoiding causing harm; (iv) justice – dealing fairly with all patients; and (v) the promotion of high standards of professional conduct. (Varkey, 2021)

The interpretation of patient autonomy informs moral rights and responsibilities, and the power of autonomy as a rationale assumes that people's choices and their respective utilities are fundamental to the value of the policy or individual transactions and are directly tied to personal welfare. This approach also underpins the principle of informed consent, a fundamental part of health care practice. Informed consent is a process that may not only enable patients to understand their health conditions and the available options for treatment, but may also help patients understand the range of what is involved in a health condition that needs treatment, the risks and potential benefits of treatment. The patient is provided with health options, information on the treatment, and the treatment is an act of trust. Without informed consent, a person does not give permission to the health professional to touch them, and this is clearly not ethically or legally permissible. (Bazzano et al., 2021)



## **4. Conflicts of Interest in Pharmacy Practice**

### Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing concern about conflicts of interest in the medical/healthcare field. As the line between information and advertising posed to health-care professionals becomes blurred, resolution of conflicts of interest may be difficult or impossible. In pharmacy, because of the expansion of the professional role and increasing profit margin from dispensing pharmaceuticals, conflicts of interest are likely to occur. Strategic directions and new programs will alter organizational culture, and desirable cultural change should begin prior to implementation of policy changes. There is a need to establish the right organizational cultures, with institutions placing higher priority on the culture of professionalism and its emphasis on patient welfare and complicating factors that can blur the distinction between service to patients and self-gain. Regulators expect pharmacists to perform their duties by advocating for their patients, and they provide a list of examples of professional conduct to help pharmacists recognize and resolve conflicts of interests in pharmacy. (Health Organization, 2022)

### Conflicts of Interest in Pharmacy Practice

In pharmacy, as the line between information and advertising that is passed on to patients becomes blurred and a focus on cost containment emerges, resolution of conflicts of interest may be difficult or impossible. The enhancement of professional boundaries is of particular importance and should be addressed early in the educational process. Ethical principles and practice standards should be utilized and internalized in order to protect patients and the integrity of the profession. Ethical competence is a part of professional competence in pharmacy, yet pharmacy practice programs are too often based purely on ensuring clinical competence. Pharmacists are continually challenged to yield to commercial, professional and regulatory factors. Justifying an action, making recommendations or managing a conflict should be based on the sound judgment of experienced pharmacists who as a part of their lifelong learning process should educate the entire team. Ethical, legal, cultural, organizational, biomedical and professional aspects, as well as social skills, should be exercised. Their integrity is not enough to guarantee their independence, as the increased temptations, pressures and complexity of commerce can bear down on them no matter where they work. To overcome these challenges, increased cooperation and communication between employers, professional organizations, regulatory authorities and educators is vital to facilitate the provision of the necessary decision-making support. Educational reform and re-professionalism must be consistent across pharmacists' entire practice continuum. In the haste to achieve new strategic directions, to expand their professional role, or to increase the operation's profit margin from



dispensing pharmaceuticals, particularly in chain and independent pharmacy settings, conflicts of interest will become increasingly common. (Bruhn et al.2021)

## Conflicts of Interest in the Health-Care System

In the health-care system, various organizations aim to optimize health of the population on one hand, and on the other, they are committed to manage commercial business. A pledge should be made to the human interests of patients, not to the commercial interest of shareholders. A better understanding of the reasons for conflicts between these interests is required. To mitigate and resolve the conflicts that tend to arise and contribute to a delivery of value to patients, even organizations representing pharmaceutical and health care must strive to ensure that if conflicts of interest arise, they are resolved in the interests of patients. There is a need to establish the appropriate cultures within organizations, prioritizing the culture of professionalism, with an emphasis on patient welfare even while other complicating factors blur the distinction between patient service and self-gain. Cultures must be consistent with the organization's objectives, roles, regulatory standards, and values, fostering ethical, legal and professional conduct and promoting an atmosphere that encourages the best possible decision-making. Conflict-related dilemmas are a growing concern for the profession, providing patients with quality and reliable services, as the consequences of organizational and corporate affairs cross a wide range of environments. (Danauskė et al.2023)

## 5. Case Studies and Ethical Decision-Making in Medication Therapy

The case studies are hypothetical situations drawn from our consulting experience in medication and other therapy management roles. The issues discussed are designed to help students and practitioners understand the nature of complex therapy management decisions. The answers to the questions posed are not intended to be unique. The case studies are not real issues faced by the collaborators, but we use the most common references of "he" and "she" in a complementary manner. These case presentations are not recommended as an important teaching method for students, but only to review specific areas of the curriculum. The spotlight tip concept of our case studies is that they are a window for facial expressions or live situations, rather than single glowing dots. Their main goal is to be a guide and to allow a more detailed presentation of therapy monitoring discussions. We hope to stimulate you to investigate solutions to ethical issues, increasing your professional self-confidence in the accuracy and robustness of decisions. (Antoniadi et al.2021)

It is essential to engage pharmacists early in their professional education process in discussions and decision-making when faced with therapeutic dilemmas. As we note in this chapter, students do not enter pharmacy educational programs as blank slates who have no preconceived beliefs about the health professions nor with the ability to think and question their beliefs. Educational and practice sites provide significant learning processes that might clash with



personal beliefs, creating dissonance. This case provides an attrition therapy that supports students in achieving resolutions and preparations for decision-making in real conflicts that arise throughout their personal and professional lives. Active learning to address these complex issues engages the students in interactive discussions and will generate strategies that might decrease decision-making conflict as they enter practice with improved confidence and strategies. In our realization, the students engaged in this case study and similar educational topics integral to their competence and confidence throughout their curriculum. (McHugh et al., 2021)

## **6. Discussion**

The basic ethical principles – autonomy, fidelity, confidentiality, justice, beneficence, and non-maleficence – are grounded in the realm of business due to a significant influence of mercantile relationships on the human and humane nature of business that differentiates it from other specialized labor. The need for trust in a contractual agreement or the expression of a genuine interest in the welfare of the other should always carry a moral imperative. Indeed, the relationship between the pharmacist and a patient requires a degree of social responsibility on behalf of the pharmacist that exceeds merely complying with health legislation. The term “duty of care” encompasses the actions of the pharmacist that go beyond just meeting professional requirements. Therefore, a pharmacist may be faced with the question of choosing between providing ethical and convenient pharmaceutical care on the one hand, and selling certain in-demand products, facilitating profit maximization. Ethical dilemmas that arise in the pharmacy workplace could be due to personal or external pressures that lead to mistakes of judgment. (Astbury & Gallagher, 2020)

Both reported when their respective cohorts were personally or legally liable, they had fewer difficulties in resolving the ethical problem encountered. Indeed, forthcoming legal action functions as a deterrent to unethical behavior. Pharmacists feel particularly exposed to legal liability. Yet, liability is not the sole lesson to learn from the figures reported; legal liability implies a reactive position. In the majority of the data, members experienced lead-time advantages, so a better defense remains playing follow the leader. Risk of liability aims to protect the reputation and position of pharmacy within healthcare, with the power to influence health at all, or within political authorities. As today, with its closest stance to sack the messenger, facing healthcare authorities, why should members reasonably report errors of judgment causing them to act unethically. (Astbury & Gallagher, 2020)

## **7. Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is evident that pharmacists face ethical dilemmas in practice in relation to their daily work. Many of these dilemmas have their origins in specific social aspects of the pharmacy profession itself. The fact that the pharmacy profession is essentially viewed as a



marketplace service being provided directly to the public is a fundamental characteristic of the problems that arise. Dilemmas can also have their origins in the training that is given to pharmacists. Clearly, if pharmacists are to resolve these ethical dilemmas effectively, then this training must be extended as thoroughly as possible to include awareness of the ethical issues they may face during work. In addition to training and education, there are other ways that can help pharmacists resolve these dilemmas effectively. For example, involving public members in health decision-making and serving on policy coordinating committees can provide insights into public views and concerns, and help to identify areas of service that need to be explored and developed further. Perception and evaluation of ethical issues in pharmacy will vary depending on the viewpoints and objectives of those involved. We acknowledge the fact that ethical dilemmas and tensions that arise can prompt awareness and action. Through that awareness and through action, the public will be ideally served. (Cox, 2021)

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