

Advocating for Pharmacy: What Can You Do?

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Editorial

In this political climate and era of highly debated healthcare, it is more important than ever to be involved in advocacy for the profession. When the Medicare Modernization Act (MMA) passed in 2003 and subsequently the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA) in 2010, pharmacists saw an opportunity to gain provider status. However, the profession encountered barriers in the area of reimbursement. Thus, it is important that pharmacists have a presence when decisions are being made about the profession. A proven and successful avenue to pursue this is advocacy. Advocacy is defined as the act or process of supporting a cause or proposal [1]. Although political advocacy through a presence at the local state capitol or Washington, D.C. tends to be the type of advocacy that immediately comes to mind, other methods for promoting the profession can occur in the form of promotion in the community with patients and other practitioners or in an academic setting to future professionals.

It is important to be an advocate for the profession because it allows pharmacists to write the narrative for the desired direction of the profession. Historically, advocacy is what led to the Durham-Humphrey amendment to the Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act in 1951 that created legend drugs and prohibited dispensing them without a prescription, thereby leading to pharmacists serving as the primary dispensers of legend drugs. It also led to the profession expanding baccalaureate programs in pharmacy to five years and later introducing the more clinical post-baccalaureate Doctor of Pharmacy (PharmD) degree and now the entry-level six year PharmD degree [2]. Most recently advocacy has led to pharmacists being recognized as providers for medication therapy management services in the MMA and a more expansive recognition in the PPACA. As an advocate, pharmacists are encouraged to subscribe to advocacy networks in the profession and get engaged to learn about current trends.

Advocacy can occur in five minutes through five different mechanisms including: 1) Writing, 2) Providing testimony at a hearing, 3) Making direct phone calls, and 4) Posting on social media, or 5) Through a direct face-to-face meeting. The method used to promote the profession depends on the advocate's goal for promotion and comfort level [3]. Whatever the method used, however, the goal is to be clear and direct about the request so the target audience understands what is being sought and how they can help it be attained.

Active participation in professional organizations is a relatively easy way to become more involved and stay abreast of current topics impacting the profession. Most professional pharmacy organizations have a section that is dedicated to advocacy for the profession [5]. On topics that impact the profession as a whole, organizations may join together to leverage their influence. A good example of this is when a coalition of 14 organizations referred to as the Patient Access to Pharmacists' Care Coalition (PAPCC) joined to have H.R. 4190

introduced in the House of Representatives to amend Title XVIII of the Social Security Act to enable patient access to and coverage for Medicare Part B services by state-licensed pharmacists in medically underserved communities. One of the most important ways to advocate for the profession is to regularly contact legislators regarding issues of importance to pharmacy [4]. Because there are groups dedicated to promoting the profession, access to information to become a political advocate is relatively easy to find. Generally, the organizations will provide guides and suggestions for activities that can be done to advocate. This includes providing a template letter that can be sent to local representatives or creating a list of talking points that can be used if granted the opportunity to speak directly with local representatives. Organizations will also provide tips on how to schedule meetings and ensure they are successful.

The classroom is a way to impact the future of the profession by influencing who becomes a pharmacist and how future pharmacists are educated. Influencing who becomes a pharmacist can come through participation in career days at schools in the community or through mentorship with family and neighbours. Often times, students' only interaction with a pharmacist is through retail pharmacy, giving them a limited view of what the profession offers. Taking advantage of invitations to speak to elementary, middle, or high school students gives pharmacists an opportunity to impact career direction. Also being involved at pharmacy schools to provide pharmacy students insight about a specific career in pharmacy can impact students and the specific area of practice they will go into. It is also an opportunity to influence their commitment to the profession in the future and how they will continue to promote it as professionals.

Having a presence in the community with patients is another mechanism that can be utilized to advocate for the profession. Due to the nature of the business of a community pharmacy, community pharmacists are positioned to impact patients' perception of the profession on a daily basis via relationship development and the subsequent trust that is established between the patient and the provider. This is an apparent benefit to pharmacists given the ranking as the number two most trusted profession behind nurses [5]. This is developed via engagement through phone calls made to the pharmacy by the patient or when the patient comes to the pharmacy counter to seek counselling. Additionally, participation in community health fairs to educate patients on treatment modalities offers an opportunity for patients to see pharmacists in a different environment separate from behind the counter, further building the perceived trust in the profession.

Healthcare practitioners in the workplace can be influenced by the role they see of the pharmacist on the team as well. Therefore, it is important to develop a rapport with other healthcare professionals and demonstrate the value a pharmacist brings to the team. This can come in the form of actively speaking up during team rounds, making calls

to a physician to make recommendations that positively impact patient care or writing thorough notes in a patient's chart to outline the monitoring that is being done on a patient. Additionally, on a broader scale pharmacists can be actively involved in healthcare institutions to provide education on drug topics, be an active contributor to various committees, or participate in grand rounds with other healthcare practitioners to demonstrate the role a pharmacist played in a patient's case.

My past experience in advocacy primarily lied in the form of promoting the profession through the classroom and mentorship. I have participated in many career days at various levels. Additionally, I am an academician in a pharmacy school and teach Pharmacy Management, which involves me teaching leadership principles within the profession as well as policy that impacts the profession. In my academic role, I have also secured funding to support pharmacist involvement in the community and subsequent publications to promote the benefits of pharmacists in patient care. However, my goal for advocacy is expanding to leverage my membership in professional organizations and become more actively involved in political advocacy. I would also like to get more students involved in political advocacy by

recruiting students to be more involved in organizational calls to action.

I challenge all pharmacists to do their part to advocate for the profession, reflecting on what they are currently doing and what more they can do to promote the profession. I have outlined some options for consideration, but it is best to choose what works for you and do your part to continue to move the profession forward.

References

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