

Pharmacists as self-care gatekeepers

Opening the door to knowledge, information



"Gatekeeper."

To me, that word conjures up visions of junior high Dungeons & Dragons games or something from *Lord of the Rings*. In pharmacy, the term has been used to describe one of the roles pharmacists play in regard to prescription drugs (e.g., "The pharmacist is the gatekeeper in pharmacotherapy, the last person a patient will talk to before taking a drug.") The word hasn't often been used in conjunction with OTC drugs, which are readily available on store shelves without going through any "gate" or talking to any "keeper." But should it be?

In "Consumer Value and Professional Opportunity in Nonprescription Drug Therapy," which was published in the Fall 2003 *International Journal of Pharmacy Education*, Tim Covington, executive director of the Managed Care Institute at Samford University's McWhorter School of Pharmacy, wrote that in the "domain of nonprescription drug therapy, the pharmacist often functions as a primary care practitioner or 'gatekeeper.'" Community pharmacies, he noted, are often the point of entry into the health care system, and patients often have several encounters with pharmacists between visits with a physician. Considering that patients see their pharmacist so much more often than their doctor, it's no wonder they feel comfortable enough to ask questions about medications—both prescription and OTC.

And ask questions they do. More than 50% of the pharmacists responding to the *Pharmacy Today* 2004 OTC Survey stated that patients ask them more than 20 questions each week. Twenty-five percent of respondents told us they get more than 40 questions each week. Obviously, despite improvements to the Drug Facts label on OTC medications, patients still have many questions about these products. People with children, the elderly, those taking medication for chronic diseases, and those who take several other OTCs are especially likely to need advice. Our survey results indicate that a third of the questions asked about OTCs are asked about medications for children, and another third of the questions are from seniors.

As self-care gatekeepers, Covington wrote, "pharmacists have the opportunity to provide vital pharmaceutical care services." Those services include preventing interactions with other OTCs or prescription drugs, warning about potential adverse effects, and

making sure patients understand how the drug is supposed to be taken. Are pharmacists doing that? I believe they are.

According to our survey, when a patient asks a question about OTC medications, the majority of pharmacists spend 3 to 5 minutes discussing it with them. Even better, 90% of the pharmacists completing the survey reported that they generally walk the patient to the OTC section and help them with their selection.

Do patients follow their advice? Our survey indicates they do; patients purchase the recommended product more than 80% of the time.

Room for improvement?

There is always room for improvement, of course. One point that jumped out at me was that while 96% of pharmacists reported asking patients if they are taking a prescription medication before they recommend an OTC, few (just 26%) reported asking patients about OTC usage before filling a prescription. Aren't these opposite sides of the same coin?

Can pharmacists do more in the area of OTCs? I think so. Besides recommending products, pharmacists can help patients manage their condition by making sure that they are using nonprescription medications in the best possible way—taking them at the right time, using the proper doses, and not mixing them with foods or other drugs that might lessen their efficacy or create problems.

Sure, patients are able to pick up and purchase an OTC without seeing a pharmacist. But the value of the pharmacist lies in the ability to provide information that will lead to better health outcomes for the patient. In that light, perhaps what gatekeeper should mean in regards to OTCs is less someone who stands between a patient and a drug, and more an opener of a door to improved knowledge and improved health.

—Ann W. Latner
Editor-in-Chief