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## THE PHARMACIST'S ROLE IN MENTAL HEALTH: IMPROVING PATIENT OUTCOMES THROUGH COMPREHENSIVE CARE, THE ALBANIAN CASE

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**Abstract:** Mental health disorders represent a significant global burden, affecting individuals of all ages and backgrounds. Alongside psychotherapy and counseling, pharmacotherapy plays a crucial role in the management of mental health conditions. Pharmacists, as accessible and knowledgeable health care professionals, bring unique expertise in medication management and contribute to the multidisciplinary approach to mental health care. The purpose of this study is to describe the role of the pharmacist within a mental health program, focusing on the specific duties in this position, its benefits, and limitations.

Pharmacists are key stakeholders in mental health care, involved in various aspects of patient care, including medication administration, drug therapy management, and patient education. Their comprehensive knowledge of psychotropic medications, their interactions, side effects, and dosage adjustments ensures the safe and effective use of these drugs. Pharmacists collaborate with physicians to optimize medication regimens, considering individual patient factors, such as comorbidities, drug allergies, and potential drug interactions. This collaborative approach increases medication adherence and reduces the risk of adverse events, promoting improved mental health outcomes. They provide essential information about drug effects, possible side effects, and strategies to manage them. Pharmacists address the concerns, misunderstandings, and stigma associated with mental health medications by promoting medication adherence and reducing treatment barriers.

Beyond their direct patient care responsibilities, pharmacists contribute to public health initiatives by promoting mental health awareness and advocacy. They actively engage in community outreach programs, collaborating with healthcare providers, policymakers, and advocacy groups to raise awareness, reduce stigma, and improve access to mental health services.

In conclusion, pharmacists play a key position in mental health care, providing essential services that optimize drug therapy and patient outcomes. Their expertise in psychotropic medications, patient education, and collaboration with healthcare providers contribute significantly to the management of mental health disorders. Future research and policy initiatives should continue to recognize and harness the potential of pharmacists in mental health care to ensure comprehensive and patient-centered approaches.

**Keywords:** pharmacist, mental health, medication management, comprehensive care, psychotherapy, counseling, medication therapy management, patient education.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Mental health conditions have a substantial impact on people worldwide, and medications often play a crucial role in treating most of these conditions. Pharmacists, as accessible and trusted healthcare experts, play a vital role in assisting individuals dealing with mental health issues. In this paper, we explore the involvement of pharmacists within multidisciplinary mental health teams, examine the existing evidence supporting their contributions, and discuss the necessary training, compensation, and policy adjustments required to acknowledge their significance and integrate pharmacists as integral members of mental healthcare teams. The purpose of this study is to describe the role of the pharmacist within a mental health program, focusing on the specific duties in this position, benefits, and limitations.

According to WHO, 2022, “mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their potential, learn and work well, and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of health and well-being that supports our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships, and shape the world we live in. Mental health is a basic human right and is essential for personal, community, and socio-economic development”.

It is difficult to find a uniform definition of mental health. This is because of the colors of its display. Mental health is a concept that is defined and understood by various international institutes and organizations. Here are some definitions of mental health from respected sources:

-World Health Organization (WHO):

"Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his community."

-The American Psychiatric Association (APA American Psychiatric Association) states that:

"Mental health refers to emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects the way people think, feel and act, and helps determine how individuals deal with stress, relate to others and make choices."

-National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH National Institute of Mental Health):

"Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we deal with stress, relate to others, and make choices. Mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence to adulthood."

-According to Mental Health Foundation UK: "Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his community."

These definitions highlight the broad scope of mental health, encompassing emotional, psychological, and social well-being. They underscore the importance of effectively managing stress, functioning well, and making positive contributions to one's community as integral aspects of mental health.

Pharmacists are well-placed to contribute to the mental health and psychological well-being of the individuals and communities they serve. In recent years, this has begun to change with leading pharmacy bodies including the International Pharmaceutical Federation (FIP), the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of the United Kingdom and the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia publishing reports and frameworks highlighting pharmacists' roles in mental health care, which may include early detection of mental illness, supporting access to mental health services and optimizing therapies.

The new publication supports the use of the FIP competency framework. Case studies sharing experiences from different countries on how the FIP Global Competency Framework has been adapted and adopted were published by the federation in May 2023. The Framework is a valuable set of behavioral competencies that can contribute to supporting the development of practitioners foundational level and that can be used to chart progress towards effective and sustainable performance, paving the way to advanced practice. "Competency development frameworks, which include a structured assembly of behavioral competencies, are increasingly essential in healthcare professional education, driven by the need for transparency in the training, development and professional recognition of healthcare professionals. The evidence to support their routine use in professional development is unclear," said Ian Bates, director of the FIP Hub.

Based on data from the University of Washington's Global Health Research Center in 2017, it was found that approximately 792 million individuals worldwide were affected by mental health disorders. Among these, 9.3% were men, and 11.9% were women.

### **1.1. Policy and Legislative Framework in Albania**

Albania has been collaborating closely with the World Health Organization (WHO) to reform its mental health system and services. The efforts led by the WHO Country Office have resulted in the adoption of a Mental Health Policy and Plans, along with the transformation of outdated psychiatric services into community-based mental health services, employing a multidisciplinary approach.

Within this framework, Albania formulated a national mental health policy in 2003, followed by the adoption of a mental health plan in 2005. Both the policy and the plan are primarily aimed at enhancing community mental health services, with a strong emphasis on deinstitutionalizing psychiatric hospitals. Albania also established its mental health legislation in 1996.

In 1999, the Ministry of Health accepted a proposal from the World Health Organization, endorsing a comprehensive overhaul of the entire psychiatric system. The responsibility for this reform initiative was vested in a national organization when, in 2000, the Minister of Health established the National Directorate Commission on Mental Health, equipping it with the requisite authority to effectuate the necessary changes. Collaborating closely with technical guidance from the World Health Organization, the primary focus of the Commission has centered on developing the aforementioned mental health policy, which is intended to serve as the political framework for transformation. The Minister of Health approved the Policy for the Advancement of Mental Health Services in Albania in March 2003. This policy sets the national objective as "the establishment and growth of a comprehensive nationwide community-based mental healthcare system" and delineates the primary means to attain this objective, which include reducing the number of psychiatric hospitals and decentralizing mental health services."

In 2012, Albania's Parliament passed legislation known as Mental Health Law No. 44/2012, with the objective of safeguarding and enhancing mental health, preventing issues associated with it, upholding the rights of individuals, and enhancing the overall well-being of those with mental health disorders. This law establishes the process and prerequisites for safeguarding mental health, encompassing the delivery of healthcare services, the creation of a supportive social environment for individuals grappling with mental health challenges, and the implementation of preventive measures to safeguard mental well-being. According to this law, the categories of services are:

- a) primary health care services;
- b) community mental health services;
- c) specialized outpatient services;
- ç) specialized mental health services with beds;
- d) special medical institutions

In the category of community mental health services are included

1. Community mental health services provide preventive, curative, and rehabilitative activities for persons with mental health disorders.

2. Community mental health services are provided by a multidisciplinary team and aim to:

- a) preserving, developing, and rehabilitating individual opportunities to overcome emergency or chronic needs;
- b) social integration, psychosocial rehabilitation, and social and professional rehabilitation.

### **1.2. Human resources involved in mental health management in Albania**

According to the National Data in 2004, there were 13.3 mental health professionals for every 100,000 individuals in the general population. The majority of these professionals were psychiatrists, with a rate of 3.2 per 100,000 population, followed by nurses at 7.0 per 100,000. In contrast, psychosocial staff, social workers, psychologists, therapists, and other mental health workers combined made up just 2.8 per 100,000 individuals in total. Unfortunately, data for the subsequent years are not available.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

We conducted a literature search using Google Scholar and PubMed databases. Our search strategy involved using keywords associated with 'pharmacists' roles,' 'Mental Health,' and 'Services.' This search incorporated both medical subject headings and initial keyword searches related to pharmacists, their roles, mental health, and services.

Furthermore, we performed an additional search using keywords such as 'pharmacist,' 'pharmacist role,' and 'mental health' to maximize the gathering of articles relevant to both topics. The final selection consisted of 23 papers, comprising quantitative and qualitative studies that examined the various roles of pharmacists in all aspects of healthcare and patient management within the context of mental health treatment

## **3. RESULTS**

All member states of the World Health Organization (WHO) have pledged their dedication to executing the 'Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013–2030.' This initiative is designed to enhance mental health by reinforcing capable leadership and governance, delivering inclusive, integrated, and accountable community-centered services, executing promotional and preventive approaches, and fortifying information, evidence, and research systems. However, the analysis of country performance in 2020, as outlined in the WHO Mental Health Atlas 2020, indicated that there has been inadequate advancement towards the agreed-upon targets set in the action plan. According to the recent development in the legislative pharmaceutical sector in Albania, the criteria to consider before implementing a comprehensive working plan

### **3.1. Pharmacy education**

Pharmacists undergo education and training that equips them with the knowledge and skills needed to provide support to people living with severe and persistent mental illness. The main components of education and training that are typically undertaken by pharmacists are outlined below:

-Pharmacists complete a Pharmacy program, which typically takes five years to complete. This program provides a comprehensive education in the pharmaceutical sciences, including pharmacology, pharmacotherapy, pharmacokinetics and pharmacodynamics. It also covers topics related to patient care, communication skills, and health care ethics.

-Clinical training: As part of their pharmacy education, pharmacists undergo experiential training in various healthcare settings, including open network pharmacies, hospitals and/or clinics. During this internship, they gain experience in patient care and develop skills in medication management, patient counseling, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

-Psychiatric Pharmacotherapy Courses: Some pharmacy programs offer specific courses or electives that focus on psychiatric pharmacotherapy. These courses cover topics such as classification of psychiatric disorders, psychopharmacology, and principles of medication management for mental health conditions.

-Continuing Education: Pharmacists are required to engage in lifelong learning through continuing education programs to stay up-to-date on the latest developments in the field. They have access to continuing education courses and resources covering various aspects of mental health, including treatment of SPMI. These programs assist in the deepening of pharmacists' knowledge and skills in the provision of support to individuals dealing with mental health issues.

-Certification and specialization: In some cases, pharmacists may pursue additional certifications or specialization in psychiatric pharmacy. These certifications demonstrate an advanced level of expertise in psychiatric pharmacotherapy and may further enhance the pharmacist's ability to provide specialized support to individuals with SPMI.

It's worth emphasizing that the particular education and training prerequisites for pharmacists may vary in different countries and jurisdictions. Pharmacists are encouraged to stay informed of the latest guidelines and best practices in mental health care to ensure they provide optimal support to individuals with SPMI

### **3.2. Pharmacy-based community mental health services**

Pharmacy-based community mental health services encompass the delivery of mental health support and care by pharmacists in community pharmacy settings. The primary objectives of these services are to enhance accessibility to mental health care, offer early intervention, and promote the well-being of community members.

This is a reality in some countries. The purpose of these services is:

- psychosocial support and counseling therapies
- medication review and adherence counseling
- general health care advice, prognosis support
- policy advocacy to promote community pharmacy-based mental health services

### **3.3. Improving patient outcomes through comprehensive care**

Pharmacists play a crucial role in managing medications for individuals with mental health problems. They possess specialist knowledge of psychotropic medications, their mechanisms of action and potential interactions with other drugs. Pharmacists work closely with prescribers to ensure appropriate drug selection, dosing, and monitoring based on individual patient factors such as age, comorbidities, and concomitant medications. Using their expertise, pharmacists help reduce the risk of adverse effects and increase the safety and efficacy of psychotropic drug regimens.

Patient education is another key component of the comprehensive care provided by pharmacists in mental health. They play an essential role in counseling patients about their medications, including potential side effects and strategies to manage them. Pharmacists address patient concerns, provide information about the expected therapeutic effects of medications, and encourage medication adherence. By empowering patients with knowledge, pharmacists promote active engagement in their treatment plans, leading to improved treatment outcomes. Pharmacists can also educate patients on typical side effects or side effects they may experience and guide them when they may need to contact their doctor.

Collaborative decision making between pharmacists and other health care providers is integral to comprehensive mental health care. Pharmacists work as part of a multidisciplinary team, collaborating with psychiatrists, psychologists and other professionals involved in patient care. Through effective communication and shared decision making, pharmacists contribute their expertise to optimize medication regimens, address drug interactions, and provide individualized treatment plans tailored to each patient's needs.

Beyond direct patient care, pharmacists actively participate in public health initiatives to promote mental health awareness, reduce stigma, and increase access to care. They engage in community outreach programs, providing educational sessions, participating in mental health campaigns and collaborating with advocacy groups. By advocating for mental health services, pharmacists strive to create a supportive environment that facilitates early intervention, appropriate treatment, and improved outcomes for individuals with mental health disorders.

### **3.4. Limitations**

Attending to patients' concerns, addressing their inquiries, and establishing clear expectations are vital aspects of ensuring therapy adherence. While these may appear as common counseling points to many pharmacists, a study conducted by Chong and colleagues in 2011 revealed that pharmacists are not consistently comprehensive in their counseling techniques. In their review of 26 randomized clinical trials involving over 11,000 patients, it was found that 60% of pharmacists provided guidance on the anticipated onset of therapeutic effects, whereas only 35% discussed the expected treatment duration. But, a significant number of pharmacists did not underscore the importance of patients adhering to their medications daily, even after the initial symptoms had receded.

While pharmacists can play a vital role in mental health management, there are some limitations to their role that must be acknowledged. These restrictions include:

- Limited time and resources: Pharmacists often face time constraints and heavy workloads, which can limit their availability to provide extensive patient counseling and education. This can hinder the depth of their involvement in mental health care and the level of support they can provide to patients.
- Scope of practice limitations: The scope of practice for pharmacists may vary in different regions and health care systems. Some jurisdictions may have restrictions on the extent of pharmacists' involvement in mental health

management, which may limit their ability to provide certain services, such as adjusting medication dosages or initiating therapy.

- Limited access to patient information: Pharmacists may not always have access to patients' complete medical history or psychiatric evaluations, which may affect their ability to make fully informed decisions about medication management. This lack of information can lead to suboptimal treatment outcomes or potential drug interactions.
- Dependence on prescriptions: Pharmacists often rely on prescribing decisions made by health care providers, such as psychiatrists or primary care physicians. If there is a lack of collaboration or communication between the pharmacist and the prescriber, this can hinder optimal medication management and limit the pharmacist's ability to provide comprehensive care.
- Stigma and patient reluctance: Mental health conditions are still stigmatized in many societies, leading to patients' reluctance to seek help or discuss their conditions openly. This can hinder the pharmacist's ability to engage with patients, provide counseling and address their concerns effectively.
- Limited reimbursement for cognitive services: In some health care systems, pharmacists may face challenges in obtaining adequate reimbursement for their cognitive services, including drug therapy management and patient counseling. This can hinder the integration of comprehensive mental health services within the pharmacy setting.
- Evolving research and treatment landscape: The field of mental health is constantly evolving, with new medications, treatment guidelines, and evidence emerging. Keeping up with the latest research and advances in the field can be challenging for pharmacists, which can affect their ability to provide the most up-to-date, evidence-based care.

Despite these limitations, recognizing and addressing these challenges can help further enhance the role of pharmacists in mental health management. Collaboration with other healthcare providers, continuing professional development, and policy changes that support expanded pharmacist roles can contribute to overcoming these limitations and improving patient outcomes in mental health care.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Pharmacists are one part of the health professionals that have a significant impact on mental health as they actively participate in the care and treatment of individuals dealing with mental health issues. Here are some important aspects of their role that can be involved in the Albanian pharmaceutical system:

1. Medication management: Pharmacists are experts in medications and their effects on the human body. In mental health, they collaborate with psychiatrists, psychologists, and other healthcare professionals to ensure appropriate medication selection, dosing, and monitoring. They help assess the need for psychotropic medications, review patient histories, consider potential drug interactions, and educate patients about their medications.
2. Medication counseling: Pharmacists provide counseling and education to patients about their mental health medications. They explain the purpose of the medication, possible side effects, dosage instructions, and any prerequisites or warnings associated with their use. They also address patient concerns, ensuring they understand how to use their medications effectively.
3. Collaborative care: Pharmacists often collaborate with the mental health team to optimize treatment outcomes. They communicate with psychiatrists, primary care physicians, therapists and other health care professionals to ensure a holistic approach to patient care. They participate in treatment planning, discuss medication adjustments, and provide valuable insight into medication-related issues.
4. Monitoring medication use: Pharmacists monitor patients' use of their prescribed medications, especially in the case of long-term mental health treatment. They can provide reminders, educational materials, and strategies to improve medication use. By tracking the use of medications, they can identify potential barriers to their use and work with patients to find solutions.
5. Managing side effects: Pharmacists help manage the side effects of psychiatric medications. They educate patients about common and rare side effects, potential interactions with other substances (such as alcohol or over-the-counter medications), and strategies to reduce or cope with harmful effects. Pharmacists can also suggest suitable over-the-counter treatments for some side effects.
6. Mental health education: Pharmacists actively support public health efforts through the dissemination of mental health education, fostering awareness about mental health concerns, and mitigating the stigma often linked to mental illness. They can develop community outreach programs, hold educational presentations, and provide resources to individuals seeking information about mental health.

It's worth emphasizing that the specific role of pharmacists in mental health can differ significantly depending on the health context, local regulations, and the specific needs of the patient population they serve.



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