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Title: A qualitative study of the frustrations experienced by community pharmacists

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Background

There are concerns that community pharmacists' (CPs') workloads (WLs) are now too high. One aspect of WL is mental workload (MWL). Measures of MWL index the demand work makes of an employee's physical and mental resources. Higher scores on these measures indicate when WL may be exceeding the resources available. For this reason high MWL is often coupled with performance decrements on tasks (i.e. errors), and experiences of strain (including frustration) as individuals work to maintain their performance under demanding circumstances.^[1] This paper reports findings of a qualitative study which formed part of a larger mixed methods study which measured CPs' experiences of MWL and how this related to the incidence of dispensing errors.

Method

Following receipt of University research ethics approval, CPs were invited to take part in a semi-structured interview about their experiences of MWL. Forty (38%) CPs responded. From these 15 CPs were strategically recruited (based on age, sex, MWL scores obtained in stage one of the study, hours of work and community pharmacy setting). Participants' narratives were transcribed verbatim, anonymised and an interpretative phenomenological analysis was conducted. Two members of the research team coded two transcripts independently and codes were compared for agreement. Agreement was reached on all codes before developing emergent and superordinate themes from the codes. A second researcher confirmed the first two superordinate themes by checking the participants' narratives.

Results and Discussion

Ten superordinate themes emerged from the data; the role of the CP, frustration, patient experience, co-workers, expertise development, sources of pressure, coping with pressure, experiences of MWL, distractions and dispensing errors. This paper reports the strongest theme, frustration as feelings of frustration were expressed in relation to all the other themes and CPs' experiences of MWL. Common to all CPs narratives was task frustration, participant 12 describes this as: *"I am pulling in many - in all different directions all at once, that is why I think the frustration spikes."* For others the volume of dispensing activity or skill mix in their pharmacy led to frustrations with finding time for advanced and enhanced services (Participant 12). All CPs reported difficulties taking breaks due to WL and this was a source of frustration and a safety concern as all CPs felt it was essential to take a mental break to *"switch off"* (Participant 49). Some CPs also reported feeling guilt towards patients when they took breaks, because dispensed prescriptions could not be handed out till they returned (Participant 3). CPs also expressed their frustration with the profession and feeling unable to make an impact on the healthcare in their community (Participant 47).

Conclusion

The frustrations reported by CPs suggest that their WL may be making demands which exceed the limits of their physical and mental resources, and at times affected the safety of their. Other industries regulate their production or WL demands, and enforce regular breaks, to prevent employee strain and reduce the risk of performance decrements.^[2] A similar approach could be considered for community pharmacy in the future.

References

1. ISO. *Ergonomic principles related to mental work-load*. 1991; ISO: Geneva.
2. Dekker, S. *Patient safety: a human factors approach*. Kindle Edition ed. 2011, Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.