

Switzerland: Building pharmacists' capacity to partner with patients in their digital health use — a collaborative patient-pharmacist teaching method

This case study is dedicated to the late Professor Olivier Bugnon (1964–2020), who envisioned, co-created, and implemented this teaching method.

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Summary

Professionals' knowledge can be paired with patients' experience-based knowledge to improve pharmacists' education. Patients' digital health use —informing themselves about their own health issues through the internet, social media and internet of things — has changed the patient-pharmacist relationship. Properly leveraged, this dynamic can create a valuable synergy and partnership.¹ Although patients use digital health, this does not mean that they use the tools properly. Pharmacists can play a key guiding role. We implemented a teaching approach to ensure that future pharmacists are better equipped to respond appropriately. Our experience in delivering classes jointly by a pharmacist and a patient expert has shown that this model can increase pharmacists' ability to communicate appropriately with patients to make digital health use a positive, collaborative experience.

Background and context

e-Patients, i.e., patients who regularly use digital health, are determined to be proactive in their own health journey. They use digital resources to inform themselves about their health and medication and to interact with healthcare professionals. The knowledge transfer between healthcare professional and patient was once accepted as top-down, paternalistic or vertical. Today, the internet, social media, and the internet of things (IoT) have rapidly changed the healthcare landscape, enabling the patient-professional relationship to become horizontal. Pharmacists, like all healthcare professionals, can and should be a resource and support to patients in acquiring health literacy. With the right approach, pharmacists can leverage the use of the internet, social media and the IoT to enhance trust and develop an empowering collaboration with the patient. It is essential that pharmacy profession educators develop curricula that directly respond to this new digital patient need. Future pharmacists must be able to understand the patient perspective, be open to a more horizontal conversation with patients, and be able to guide them towards useful aids for self-education. This approach has the potential to support improved patient outcomes. A methodology to effectively train future pharmacists to better meet the needs of patients, especially e-patients, has been set up since 2014 at the Institute of Pharmaceutical Sciences of Western Switzerland (University of Geneva/University of Lausanne).

Educational description

It was determined that classes delivered in the initial years of study could set a strong foundation to raise future pharmacists' awareness about e-patient needs and train them in appropriate responses. A key new resource available is patient experts who can teach healthcare professionals about their own illness-related experiences, as well as how they use digital resources in their quest to self-inform. Aiming for holistic and relevant learning, we decided to establish classes given jointly by a pharmacist and an expert e-patient. This consolidation of academic and experience-based knowledge creates more meaningful and impactful content, given that all stakeholders are part of the process and conversation. The patient perspective is included from curriculum development, aligning with the e-patient motto: "Nothing about us without us."² When discussing practical situations, students can ask patients questions directly, instead of making assumptions about what the patient perspective might be. A noteworthy aspect of this patient-pharmacist joint teaching method is the personal storytelling of the patient experience, which gives students insights into real-life situations to drive home the learning. Internet use also presents public health and safety challenges, such as the online purchase of medicines. When pharmacists create relationships of trust with patients, patients become more willing to disclose information about their online ordering activities. This enables pharmacists to better direct patients towards safe decision-making, with quality information and proper guidance.³ Our in-person classes feature a

total of eight hours of theoretical teaching and four hours of group workshops. Students must also independently complete a paper based on a guided interview with a patient with chronic disease. We then discuss the results and findings from this experience together. The theoretical section covers content pertaining to: the impact of digital health on pharmacy practices; different strategic visions and Swiss cyberhealth laws (notably the electronic health record); the evolution and impact of the web and digital health tools and apps; the definition of e-patient and e-patient culture as well as the evolution of the patient role from passive recipient to proactive partner; and ways to best guide patients towards quality information. Every new session, the classes are revised and updated to ensure the most relevant theoretical content, because knowledge quickly evolves within digital health. In the first workshop, students analyse various internet sites. They examine the quality of their content and usability, who is behind the site, what the site's objectives are how patient data is stored, and whether the site information is strictly commercial or if the content has an added value for the patient. The data compiled from the guided patient interviews represents tangible material to analyse together in class, often leading to discussions around concrete patient situations that the pharmacist may encounter. This exploration teaches students what practical points help guide the patient for value-added use of the internet in health and how-to best partner with the patient towards a constructive relationship.

Outcomes, lessons learned and recommendations

According to structured student satisfaction surveys, the overall feedback is positive. Students appreciate the hands-on approach and the opportunity to “pick the brain” of a real patient. Students emerge with a better appreciation of the patient perspective in the relationship with the pharmacist. This sets the groundwork for effective skills in partnership communication styles within professional practice and a collaborative approach that aims to enhance trust, improve patient knowledge, facilitate individualised care strategies and improve patient safety. Discussing different aspects of digital health from a professional point of view builds students' capacity to assess digital tools objectively. Students are reassured that their chosen profession remains one of human interaction — digital tools can enhance patient-pharmacist relationships, not replace them. The expert patient's unique skill set and experience are central and this method requires partnership with patients in both curriculum development and class delivery. Expert patients must be carefully selected to bring both health literacy and teaching ability. On top of this, their role requires them to share highly personal stories about their health journey, which can be difficult or emotional for them. A patient expert needs to have understanding and hindsight of their health situation and have developed ease in talking about it publicly. In our experience, this combination of professional and patient perspective promotes an ideal learning experience. As Dave deBronkart — “e-patient Dave” — wrote: “Patients are the most underused resource in healthcare.”⁴ In future, the integration of such a course into every pharmacist training curriculum should be developed. Not only is online and digital activity an ever more central aspect of daily life, but the trend towards patients' participation in their own health is more widely accepted in healthcare⁵ and increasingly expected by patients, particularly younger generations.

References

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