

Review Article

A Review on the Pharmaceutical Care Services during COVID-19 Pandemic in the Philippines

ABSTRACT

Aims: As a developing country, the Philippines was among the hard-hit countries in the on-going COVID-19 pandemic. Pharmacists have stressed the significant role they play on the frontlines in the fight to lessen the pandemic's detrimental impacts.

Methodology: This article identifies and describes the pharmaceutical care services offered by pharmacists during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines by utilizing available published articles retrieved from different journal databases.

Results: Pharmaceutical care services like teleconsultation and provision of drug information were provided to the public and even to other healthcare professionals through telepharmacy, management of minor ailments in the community, educating and advocating on vaccination and even undergoing training to administer vaccines to help the country attain herd immunity were documented.

Conclusion: Indeed, the pandemic has offered a chance to emphasize the critical role pharmacists play in healthcare delivery especially in a country where people perceive pharmacists as merely sellers of medicines.

Keywords: pharmaceutical care, pharmacy, COVID, services, Philippines

1. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 is an ongoing global pandemic that has disturbed and even claimed lives. According to the Department of Health, as of December 14, 2021, over two (2) million Filipinos have been affected by COVID-19, and more than fifty (50) thousand deaths have occurred [1]. Since the outbreak of this pandemic, pharmacists have been in the forefront of developing creative measures to reduce the pandemic's negative impact [2].

According to Agaceta, the Filipino pharmacists have shifted roles from being product-oriented to a more patient-oriented practice [3]. In this COVID-19 epidemic, pharmacists have shown to be vital members of the frontline healthcare team, performing key tasks and responsibilities to limit the disease's negative impact [4].

Community pharmacists were able to provide direct patient care since the majority of patients sought primary care from local drugstores [5]. Hospital pharmacists were able to provide pharmaceutical treatment to COVID-19 patients by shifting from non-dispensing roles. [6]. Other pharmacists participated in the pandemic by communicating COVID-19 medication information, ensuring the public

has access to medications and supplies, providing patient education, and raising awareness on COVID-19 protocols [4].

With such trying times and evolving conditions, pharmacists are confronted with uncommon obstacles, and they are employing innovative techniques to address them [7]. The Philippine Pharmacists Association (PPhA), International Pharmaceutical Federation (FIP) and other local organizations in the country have issued guidelines and recommendations for pharmacists, as well as organizing webinars to equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills to fulfill their roles in the pandemic. However, what is happening on the ground is not consistent with any guideline or webinar.

Hence, the objective of this review is to highlight different pharmaceutical care services delivered by pharmacists during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines.

2. METHODS

A literature search which started last December 3, 2021 was conducted through online journal databases such as PubMed, Google Scholar, Elsevier, and Directory of Open Access Journals. Titles and abstracts were later screened to identify studies that described the pharmaceutical care provided by the pharmacists during the pandemic in the Philippines. Studies that mentioned “pharmacists”, “pharmaceutical care”, “pharmaceutical care services”, “pandemic”, or “COVID-19” that took place in the “Philippines” were included. Papers that did not include pharmacists, or were published before the pandemic started, or the pharmaceutical care services were rendered outside the Philippines, were excluded.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Pharmacists may play an important role in the pandemic as healthcare professionals, interacting directly with the public [8], caring for patients with chronic conditions [9], and working directly with COVID-19 patients as hospital pharmacists assigned to prepare their medications [10]. Furthermore, they may give trustworthy information for coronavirus prevention, detection, treatment, and management [11].

According to Zheng and colleagues (2020), because face-to-face contacts were limited due to the pandemic, pharmacists used already available technology such as mobile phones and the Internet to give relevant medication information and counseling services beyond those provided at the counter [12]. Hence the emergence of a pharmaceutical care service known as “Telepharmacy”, where pharmacists and patients, or even other healthcare practitioners, can use information and communication technology (ICT) to connect, which can eventually save patients trips to medical facilities while also being safer for both healthcare providers and patients [13].

Telepharmacy was carried out in the Philippines by pharmacist volunteers who are members of the Philippine Pharmacists Association (PPhA). To accept new and follow-up pharmaceutical enquiries, two Google Forms were created: one for the general public, in Filipino, and another for healthcare professionals (HCPs), in English. Both responses were sent into a single documentation spreadsheet. Volunteer pharmacists utilized their mobile phones to respond to service consumers who wanted to communicate via text messages. The telepharmacy service was introduced on March 20, 2020, through the Philippine Pharmacists Association (PPhA) Facebook page. The service was able to execute a total of 271 queries from March 20 to May 31, 2020. Drug indications, as well as vitamins, supplements, and herbal items, drew the most attention from the general audience. The topic of medication procurement piqued the most interest among healthcare experts. The users were pleased with the service and the information extended by the pharmacists [14].

Pharmacists in the community also played an important role in the treatment of minor illnesses. See and Arce (2020) documented the engagement of community pharmacists in the care of minor ailments, as well as their practices and perceived limitations in providing pharmacy services. Findings revealed that community pharmacists assisted in the treatment of four common ailments: colds, cough, skin allergies, and diarrhea (which are few symptoms of COVID-19). Community pharmacists were well-versed in the causes of minor diseases, and the drugs they provided were in accordance with recognized product indications. However, obstacles such as a lack of institutional guidelines, a lack of

disease-specific training, insufficient clinical skills, and a dominant patient self-selection behavior for OTC drugs were seen as major obstacles [15].

Lastly, in a study conducted by Ongpoy et al. (2019), vaccination campaigns were carried out by pharmacists. Pharmacists may also give vaccinations if they complete immunization training as required by Republic Act 10918, otherwise known as the Philippine Pharmacy Act. [16]. Fortunately, on March 26, 2021, PRC issued Resolution No. 05 Series of 2021, effective immediately, accrediting Philippine Pharmacists Association, Inc (PPhA) as the training provider for the "Immunizing Pharmacist Certification Program." As of June 2021, according to the PPhA, there are now seventy-three (73) Immunizing Pharmacists on the job, with another three hundred fifty-six (356) still in training. [17]. On January 25, 2021, the Department of Health and the Philippine Pharmacists Association held a vaccine deployment town hall to highlight the importance of pharmacists in this immunization initiative [18].

4. CONCLUSION

During the pandemic, pharmacists in the Philippines provided a variety of pharmaceutical care services, including teleconsultation and drug information through telepharmacy services, community-based management of minor ailments as people were unable to access hospitals due to the influx of COVID-19 patients, and vaccination advocacy, where pharmacists have now completed an immunization certification program to ensure that they are up to date on the latest vaccines and they are equipped as they participate in the nation's COVID vaccination programs.

There might have been other pharmaceutical care services provided by the Filipino pharmacists during the pandemic which were not reported and published. But this article shows that pharmacists have not stopped working because of COVID-19 and in fact, have stepped up to take on more responsibilities. Pharmacists are frontline workers; they should be addressed as such and given the recognition they deserve.

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