

ATTENTION: Assignment, Health, Lifestyle and Political Reporters

**Seven in 10 Ontarians believe
pharmacists could play a greater role
in managing their health**

Patients already rely on pharmacists but welcome more services

(Toronto, ON – March 2, 2009) – As Pharmacist Awareness Week begins today, results of a recent Ipsos Reid survey show that most Ontarians (71 per cent) believe that pharmacists could do more to help them manage their health. In fact, if they knew that their pharmacist had the appropriate training, many Ontarians would rely on them for a wide range of services.

The poll, conducted by Ipsos Reid on behalf of the Ontario Pharmacists' Association (OPA), revealed that a majority of Ontarians would rely on their pharmacist for providing appropriate medication or advice for minor ailments (86 per cent); adjusting medication format, such as from a pill to a liquid (84 per cent); and authorizing prescription extensions where there are no existing refills (67 per cent). Two-thirds reported they already rely on their pharmacist for support with minor health issues.

"We conducted the survey to determine whether people in Ontario knew how pharmacists could support their health now and in the future," said Dennis Darby, OPA's CEO. "The results show we're on the right track. Most patients are confident that pharmacists could provide more health services. With an aging population and more complex chronic disease, pharmacists can and should play a greater role in making sure patients get the care they need, when they need it."

The Ontario government is currently considering an expanded role for pharmacists.

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Ontario Pharmacists'
Association
375 University Ave, Suite 800,
Toronto, ON M5G 2J5
Tel. (416) 441-0788
Fax (416) 441-0791
Toll free 1-877-341-0788
email mail@opatoday.com
www.opatoday.com

Pharmacists are experts in medication management

Pharmacists have an in-depth knowledge of hundreds of prescription and non-prescription medications, including side effects, interactions with drugs and food, and adverse events. They are trained to assess, monitor, support and educate patients on their medication therapy.

This is especially important when a patient has been prescribed multiple medications by several different prescribers. The pharmacist is a critical link within the primary health care team, working with other health care professionals to advise on potential side effects, interactions, and any necessary adjustments to medications.

Today, pharmacists have at least five years of university education that includes rigorous education in physiology, microbiology, pathophysiology, clinical biochemistry, pharmacology, toxicology and pharmaceutical care. Many pharmacists undertake additional post-graduate training to become certified as diabetes or asthma educators, and some may specialize in areas such as geriatrics and menopause.

Pharmacists already provide many patient care services

On a daily basis, pharmacists already provide many health services that are not widely known or recognized, such as screening for cholesterol and diabetes management, hosting flu shot clinics and education days on health and wellness topics, and offering expert advice and information on other conditions.

Pharmacists assess patients and recommend the best options for the treatment of minor ailments, which may involve medication, lifestyle changes or referrals to other practitioners. They advise patients on the use of prescribed medications, non-prescription therapies, and health care aids and devices.

Pharmacists are one of the most accessible health care providers

As health care needs increase and become more complex, these services will be even more critical, especially for patients who don't have access to a physician, such as those in rural or remote areas where the pharmacist may be the only health care provider they see, the first one they see, or the one they see most often.

The Ontario government has reported that it takes an average of 4.6 hours for patients with minor ailments to be seen, diagnosed and moved out of an emergency department, in 90 per cent of cases. Pharmacists are already capable of assessing and treating many minor ailments. If they are authorized to do so through an expanded scope of practice, patients would receive the care they need, faster; and physicians would have more time to deal with more serious cases.

Collaboration benefits patients and Ontario's health care system

By making better use of their unique expertise, pharmacists can help improve patient care, take pressure off family physicians, emergency rooms and walk-in clinics, reduce wait times and hospital stays, and increase the efficiency and effectiveness of Ontario's health care system.

In its report entitled "Critical Links: Transforming and Supporting Patient Care," the Health Professions Regulatory Advisory Council has recommended, among other things, that pharmacists be authorized to prescribe drugs for the purposes of medication therapy management (within this authority, pharmacists could adapt, modify and extend an existing prescription), and order laboratory tests for the purpose of medication monitoring and management.

The council has also recommended that steps be taken towards the introduction of a minor ailments program in Ontario. An interprofessional working group would determine, among other things, the list of minor ailments that pharmacists could treat under an agreed formulary, and protocols for referral to and communication with other health professionals.

Examples of minor ailments might include eye infections, yeast infections, athlete's foot, dermatitis, or cold sores.

Working together to ensure high standards of patient safety and care

Before pharmacists can provide services beyond their current scope of practice, new standards will need to be developed to ensure accountability and to address different types of prescribing.

Practice standards, guidelines and policies would be expanded to include the new services. For pharmacists who choose to provide more services, there would be continuing education and additional certification programs where necessary.

“Pharmacists can offer increased, safe and effective care to patients in Ontario, and contribute more to the management of chronic disease,” said Tina Perlman, OPA Chair, and a London-based pharmacist. “Pharmacists are experts in medication therapy management, and they are one of the most accessible health care professionals.”

The Ipsos Reid poll was conducted from January 13 to 22, 2008. A representative randomly selected sample of 800 adults was interviewed by telephone. With a sample of this size, the results are considered accurate to within ± 3.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

About the Ontario Pharmacists' Association

The Ontario Pharmacists' Association is the professional association that represents the views and interests of more than 11,000 pharmacists and pharmacists-in-training across the province. The Association works to inspire excellence in the profession and practice of pharmacy, and to promote wellness for patients.

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For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact:

Valerie Cameron
Tel: 416-847-1320
Cell: 416-937-6154
Email: valerie.cameron@mslworldwide.com

Collin Matanowitsch
Tel: 416-847-1330
Cell: 416-317-4740
Email: collin.matanowitsch@mslworldwide.com