

Pharmacy practice in Saudi Arabia: directions, opportunities, and challenges

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Pharmacy practice passed through tremendous changes in last couple of decades. Early in 20th century, pharmacist's job was mainly related manufacturing or compounding of medicinal products. However, with the development of manufacturing industry, this strategic role had been handled almost entirely by dedicated manufacturing facilities. Pharmacists then concentrated in logistics of handling the pharmaceutical items starting from purchasing, storing, and dispensing. This role does not require highly professional practice nor does it match the new health care challenges. Two major interrelated factors were pushing into new direction. Those are medication related problem and cost. As a result, clinical pharmacy practice came into picture and proved to have valuable positive patient outcome and reduction in healthcare related cost. Pharmaceutical care is a normal development due to the results shown from clinical pharmacy practice. Pharmaceutical care could be simplified as viewing more comprehensive patient care practice provided by all pharmacists.

The above scenario in moving from specific practice into another was typically demonstrated in USA. However, Saudi Arabia pharmacy practice is passing through the same changes but with different speed simply because the change forcing factors was, and might be still, not enough to drive the required change.

Though there is no published studies comparing the level of pharmacy practice in Saudi Arabia and nearby countries, but experts in the field might consider Saudi Arabia as pioneer in pharmacy practice in Middle East which could be attributed to many factors.

Till few years back, the only college of pharmacy in Gulf countries was in King Saud University and till now, its the only university that offer master degree in clinical pharmacy which was started in early 90s. At this time, many new universities are emerging in the area.

The availability of few advanced hospitals, like King Fahad National Guard Hospital and King Faisal Specialist Hospital, were also a contributing factor to the advancement in pharmacy practice in Saudi Arabia. Those hospitals sending many pharmacists to USA to get Pharm D degree and even residencies or fellowships and when those are coming back into the country, they further enhance the level of pharmacy practice.

Recently Saudi counsel for health specialties poses some restrictions in giving license to pharmacists including the setting minimum hours for attending continuous medical education. That's could be even improved through certifying third party providers.

Saudi Arabia spending 8% of its GDP and it's considered the largest per capita market for healthcare products. Though still, MOH control about 70% of all healthcare related expenditure, the trend is toward privatization. In last couple of years, we noticed an increase in number of hospitals as well as introduction of new healthcare services in those hospitals. Community or retail pharmacies are booming in the country in term of number.

With the increasing number of pharmacies in the country, either hospital or community pharmacies, competition will force owners or managers to enhance their services to compete in the market. As the price of drugs is controlled by the government, the only method of competition will be improving a service, what we call in our profession, pharmaceutical care.

Insurance companies in healthcare business will find its place in changing environment. The mandatory health insurance for all expatriates will be forced by government over all private companies. The next step might be applying the same for Saudi employees in private sector. The third step might involve privatization of most healthcare related sectors.

As a result of those changing forces, professional pharmacy practice will be enforced in various levels. State of art practice will be basic requirement rather than option for advance companies. High level of practice will ensure keeping current customers or even attracting new customers using cost effective methods. Following high standard practice will reduce the legal claim from malpractice.

Quality of pharmacy practice will be measured and will be rewarded accordingly. That's will be equally applied over the healthcare providers as well as to the pharmacist's level. The development of agreed measurable criteria will take time, but will serve all toward better pharmacy practice.

Pharmacists are required now to start taking the initiatives to improve their skills and knowledge and starts applying what learned into patient care process. Time and resources are mainly what's quoted by pharmacists as major obstacles that prevent them in developing their professional practice. It's an issue of priority; pharmacists should keep their professional advancement in their top priority. With the current era of internet services, resources is no more an excuse. Pharmacists should utilize any resource available to them to enhance their professional practice standard which will be internally affecting their job satisfaction.

The vast majority of practicing pharmacists in the country are expatriates. Pharmacists in Saudi Arabia are currently working in MOH hospitals or different administrative directories, military hospitals, pharmaceutical companies either with multinationals or

local companies, private hospitals, and community hospitals. The later two, are the least attractive to pharmacists in the country despite it's the most vital place and the largest in size as well as it's the most sites expected to grow exponentially. This is crucial to decision makers as those sites should be made attractive to qualified pharmacists.

The MOH, through department of medical license directory, currently conduct an audit reviews for private community and hospital pharmacies. However, they need to adapt new criteria pertinent to quality of pharmaceutical service provided by healthcare centers to match the new practice models. Their current criteria concentrates in some logistics and some regulatory requirements and many of their criteria are irrelevant.

The requirement in the country for higher pharmacy degrees or specific certification for specific practice is increasing for virtually all practicing pharmacists.

Pharmacists should view those challenges in pharmacy practice as an opportunity and taking the leadership steps which will be reflected in their professional career as well as to the Saudi community.

Bibliography: