

Strengthening the role of pharmacies

Building pharmacists' capacity as primary health care providers

PHARMACIES IN VIETNAM

As licensed health care professionals, pharmacists in Vietnam play an important role in linking the community to health care and vital medicines. There is an increasing recognition globally, and in Vietnam, that providing consumers with medicines alone is not sufficient to achieve treatment goals. Therefore, pharmacists are being called on to expand their role—from drug seller to client counselor, drug treatment manager, adherence counselor, and advisor on preventing future illness. As advocated by the World Health Organization and the International Pharmaceutical Federation, pharmacists may help not only to improve access to health care, but also to maximize the potential benefit of medicines.

In Vietnam, like in many developing countries, pharmacies are often the first place people go for common health issues. They are often a preferred—and sometimes the only—source of health care information and services. With more than 40,000 pharmacies nationwide, they reach even the most remote areas of the country. However, the majority of these facilities are privately owned and not well incorporated into the national public health system. Despite a national program to implement international Good Pharmacy Practice (GPP) standards, the sheer size of the network and the lack of human resources for monitoring and regulation enforcement have made it difficult to improve pharmacy services in Vietnam.

A NEW CLIENT-ORIENTED HEALTH CARE MODEL

Between January 2008 and July 2012, PATH evaluated and updated pharmacy practices in five provinces in Vietnam. PATH developed a client-oriented primary health care model that empowered pharmacists to serve as client advocates and client counselors. Moreover, PATH promoted linkages between pharmacists and other primary health services through a referral network.

The project began with a needs assessment to determine the areas where pharmacy staff needed knowledge, training, and support. Based on the results, a technical assistance package was developed that focused on client-oriented services; enhancing practical skills in counseling; promoting appropriate referrals (including developing referral slips and practical trainings on when and how to refer); improving pharmacy personnel's knowledge of key



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health topics; working with provincial secondary medical schools to update the pre-service training curriculum; and providing classroom and on-the-job training, mentoring, and supportive supervision. The project also conducted community education activities in each province, including creating a project logo for display at supported pharmacies, training a network of volunteer health promoters, and delivering messages through local TV. In addition, PATH supported pharmacies and provincial departments of health to meet Vietnam's GPP certification standards. In total, PATH trained more than 9,000 staff on nine key health topics, counseling and interpersonal communication skills, and standards and practice of GPP.

RESULTS

After four years of implementation, PATH compared data from the final evaluation to baseline data gathered in 2008. The baseline and final evaluations included both quantitative and qualitative methods to measure changes in pharmacy staff knowledge, attitudes, and practice, as well as change in community members' health-seeking behaviors and knowledge of key primary health care topics. Key findings include:

- Improved knowledge of pharmacy staff:** Statistically significant improvements were seen in knowledge of management of fever, cough, diarrhea, oral contraception, and other common health problems. For example, pharmacists that participated in the project increased their knowledge of correct side effects of oral contraception from 32 percent at baseline to 62 percent at final evaluation.

- **Enhanced behavior of pharmacy staff:** Mystery clients were used to determine change in actual pharmacy staff practice in project-supported pharmacies. The percent of pharmacies that counseled clients on diarrhea prevention and emergency contraception significantly increased from baseline to final evaluation. For example, at baseline, less than 1 percent of the surveyed pharmacists counseled clients on how to prevent diarrhea during the mystery client visits. At the final evaluation, the proportion increased to 15 percent.
- **Increased client satisfaction by mystery clients and community members:** In addition to pharmacy staff's improved counseling practice, mystery clients also reported improvements in the staff attitudes and their satisfaction with services. Moreover, data from community surveys show an increase in client satisfaction with information provided by pharmacists. At baseline, client satisfaction with information provided was 61 percent. By project end, satisfaction increased to 86 percent.
- **Unchanged community knowledge and attitude:** Results from the final evaluation indicate that community members did not have a different expectation of pharmacists in the final evaluation compared to at baseline. Moreover, no significant changes were found among community members in their health knowledge despite the project's health communication and information, education, and communication efforts.
- **Connecting pharmacies and health facilities:** In focus group discussions with facility-based health care providers, they acknowledged that pharmacies play an important role in providing primary health care services to the community. Both pharmacists and the health care providers recognized the mutual benefit of having more interaction and cooperation between their sectors.
- **Supportive supervision provided useful benefits to the various stakeholders:** Supportive supervision teams were trained to provide on-the-job guidance to pharmacy staff. In focus group discussions, pharmacy staff noted that they appreciated being able to talk with the supervisors about difficulties they had when providing client-oriented information and services. Supportive supervisory visits were also opportunities for pharmacy personnel to obtain additional training. Pharmacy owners said that supportive supervision helped to alleviate issues related to staff turnover as new staff would have the means to obtain skills to provide GPP-standard services.

LESSONS LEARNED

Based on data gathered from the project, PATH developed the following lessons learned and recommendations for the next generation of interventions targeting pharmacies and pharmacists:

- Provided with appropriate training, pharmacists can move beyond the traditional role of drug seller to be more effective health care professionals.
- To ensure the rational, safe, and effective use of drugs, GPP should define a minimum standard for counseling.
- To improve current and future performance, pharmacists need continuing professional development.
- To optimize therapeutic outcomes for patients, pharmacists should establish standard operating procedures for referrals to physicians, specialists, or other health care providers, where appropriate.
- Pharmacies are currently underutilized and could serve as a site for delivering primary health care services.
- Technical assistance can help facilitate uptake of GPP certification and can be used to promote quality improvements. A focused effort to scale-up GPP is needed in rural areas.

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