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How Pharmacies can implement sustainable practices in everyday dispensing.



The industry of pharmacy is much more than just community pharmacy. It includes both the development and production of pharmaceuticals. The pharma industry as a whole creates waste and pollution through multiple channels; from improper drug disposal to medication and operational waste.

Pollution from these sources results in detrimental effects on the environment and public health and contributes to a significant amount of pollution by the industry.

Pharmacy is moving towards a more sustainable future, but balancing the needs of patients, legal requirements, economic concerns and ensuring the safety and efficacy of medication poses a difficult task. Consumer and legislative focus on reducing waste and pollution and increasing sustainability demands proactive yet viable changes that benefit pharmacy businesses, patients and the planet.

The pharmacy industry at large must play its part in improving patients' health in a more sustainable manner, for the sake of both our environment and the health of the future.

Hospital and Community Pharmacists have the ability to make a difference as the front-line of the industry; either through actions taken in their daily work or through the promotion of change at a regional or even enterprise level. Though change is never easy and various barriers to implementing such alterations do exist, basic sustainability issues can be addressed by Pharmacists immediately and to great effect.

This whitepaper serves to present some of the issues that the pharmacy industry faces regarding sustainable practices and how Hospital and Community Pharmacists can work to address them.



Patient Education on Drug Disposal, and Medication Waste

Drug disposal is a major issue that the healthcare industry faces. According to [medicinewaste.com](http://www.medicinewaste.com), a campaign to raise public awareness of the importance of ordering only required drugs, a report by the Department of Health estimates that as much as £300million is wasted every year on unused or partially used medication returned for disposal.

Patient education is one of the primary jobs that pharmacists perform. By educating patients on proper medication use, pharmacists can help to prevent the inappropriate use and wastage of medication.

Educating patients about proper drug disposal for expired or unusable medicines is also a vital opportunity

for Pharmacists to help improve patient awareness and participation in sustainable environmental practices. In reality, it may be difficult for pharmacists to mention disposal practices at a patient's every visit to the Pharmacy, but adding information about proper drug disposal to patient product information documents may be a viable method.

Including either disposal instructions specific to the medication dispensed, or instructions to find such resources on patient information may be a step towards decreasing the amount of medication wastage entering the environment.



Awareness



Education



Information

£300million is wasted every year on unused or partially used medication.

- The Department of Health



To read more about the 'Order Only What You Need' campaign, visit: www.medicinewaste.com



The Impact of Operational Waste

In addition to the waste contributed by medication, the pharma business generates waste as part of typical operations; a significant portion in the form of paper and plastic waste.

Pharmacies are required to store documents, such as controlled drug records and paper prescriptions. Changing these documents to a paperless format could save thousands of tons of paper wastage each year. With the outbreak of Coronavirus in 2020, the Healthcare industry has increasingly embraced paperless routes, including the issuing of e-prescriptions and digital receipts. Taking this a step further to include other pharmacy documentation and information could greatly reduce the amount of paper used in pharmacies and improve sustainability in pharmacy practice.

There are situations in pharmacy practice where paper is still essential, such as labelling medication containers which provide patients with vital information about the drugs they take – though not every situation requires paper use.

Changes to the ways that pharmacies communicate patient education and maintain records, for instance,

may go a long way to reducing the operational and medication waste that pharmacies produce.

In addition to paper waste, pharmacies utilise large volumes of plastic containers to both store and dispense medications. Sourcing quality pharmaceutical packaging from environmentally conscious suppliers who readily provide information and guides on how to correctly dispose of, recycle or reuse packaging items is one way to ensure pharmacists are informed about the products they are using to dispense medication in. Efforts to properly recycle medication bottles, jars and cartons according to the materials they are made from can improve waste reduction considerably.

Another method is by attempting to use the smallest dispensing bottle possible for each prescription and packaging prescriptions as efficiently as possible to cut down on this waste. Both recycling and waste reduction are vital to making pharmacy practice more sustainable.



Go
Paperless



Encourage
Recycling



Use Responsible
Suppliers

Some operational changes Pharmacists may wish to include in their day-to-day practices:



Minimising drug waste by disposing of/destroying drugs properly



Reducing the paper and plastic waste that form an inherent part of pharmacy business operations



Implementing electronic methods of information delivery, such as electronic prescribing (e-prescriptions) and computerised documentation



Recycling and repurposing plastic medication bottles and paper prescription bags

Potential Barriers to Implementation

Though patient education, recycling, and paperless communication methods are feasible short-term options, there are still a few barriers towards implementing sustainable practices. For instance, some patients prefer hard copies of their prescription, or do not have access to forms of electronic communication.

Recycling medication bottles can also raise concerns regarding safety – especially if the medications they contained were especially potent or toxic. Certain medication bottles may also be exempt from recycling with the usual stock. Some medications can be of a very high cost too, and therefore both shelf stability and demand may not warrant purchasing such medications in bulk amounts.



In these cases, identifying patients and medications that may be exempt from general sustainable practices and allowing individual patients to opt-out of receiving electronic documentation would be necessary. Through careful effort and analysis, the benefits of sustainable practices can be balanced with the benefits of existing practice.



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Looking to the Future

Pharmacists are some of the most accessible healthcare workers available, and they have the ability to make meaningful changes. Their unique position as medication dispensers, experts, and counsellors gives pharmacists the ability to truly impact the sustainability of the field as they perform their role.

By educating patients on the importance of appropriate drug use, their options regarding returning used drugs and paperless methods of communication pharmacists can improve awareness and address sustainability issues by making adjustments at the community level as they interact directly with patients at the counter.

Pharmacists have the ability to truly impact the sustainability of the field as they perform their role.

Additionally, applying practices like recycling bottles, boxes and cartons, sourcing efficient packaging from environmentally aware suppliers, and disseminating information could greatly reduce the bulk of physical waste generated during pharmacy operations. These are short-term policies that can be implemented without waiting for legislation.

Sustainability in pharmacy is most certainly attainable. Though some of these suggested changes require company-wide policy shifts that would have to be suggested to company leadership, and that may still take a significant amount of time to adopt and implement, small steps taken by individuals today can turn into larger steps in the future as pharmacists advocate for better practices.

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