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# Strengthening **PHARMACARE**

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THE  
CONTRIBUTION  
OF THE  
SCIENCE  
AND PRACTICE  
OF PSYCHOLOGY

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Title: **Strengthening Pharmacare: The Contribution of the Science and Practice of Psychology**

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## Introduction

The Canadian health system is a dynamic partnership between patients and professionals using an array of diagnostic and treatment techniques and technologies to promote health and combat illness. Medication is one of the powerful agents used in this effort.

Over the last 50 years, scientific activity has resulted in the development of numerous medications designed to treat a broad spectrum of illnesses and conditions. Research in the area is ongoing, active and fertile, ensuring that more specific, complete and effective drugs will continue to be developed. Canadian governments responsible for the funding and delivery of health care have developed different province specific initiatives known as “pharmacare programs”. Presently, about one third of Canadians have very adequate out-of-hospital coverage (typically through extended health insurance plans), one third have basic coverage and one third have inadequate or no coverage at all. The goal of any pharmacare program must aim to ensure that all Canadians can benefit fully from scientific advances in this area.

The success of pharmacare depends on its design and implementation. To maximize the likelihood of success, it is important to consider the human aspects of such a program. For example, consumers need a pharmacare program that is responsive and user friendly. In order to be effective, the program must provide patients with manageable information concerning health maintenance, their illness and the importance of adhering to treatment regimes. Consumers need information about other medications, behaviors or practices that could interfere or interact with or improve the effect of their prescription. Finally, Canadians must have reasonable access to treatments of choice that work in tandem with or that have been shown to be superior to pharmaceutical therapy for identifiable individuals.

## The Importance of Adherence

Research has consistently demonstrated that during the course of treatment between 50% to 80% of health care consumers can be expected to be poorly adherent to their medication regime. Having accurate and easily understood information about medication is a necessary but not sufficient factor in ensuring treatment adherence. Psychologists have expertise in behavioural techniques that can maximize treatment adherence and proper medication use.

Psychologists are trained to:

- Identify predictors of non-adherence including patient characteristics, regime related variables, health-provider relationship variables, etc.
- Develop measurement tools to assess adherence.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of interventions designed to enhance adherence.



- Assess consumers' psychological readiness to begin complex medical treatments.
- Educate the multi-disciplinary treatment team about the importance of adherence and challenges to adherence.
- Develop relapse prevention programs.

The issue of adherence is critical to effective health care and a successful pharmacare program. Medication non-adherence results in considerable human suffering and economic costs, both for the individual and society. For example, improper use of antibiotics has resulted in the evolution of treatment resistant bacteria, a situation that seriously threatens the health of Canadians. Drug resistant strains of HIV can develop rapidly if patients do not maintain near perfect adherence rates (95% adherence is the standard goal in HIV care). Diabetic non-compliance has serious consequences.

In order to maximize the treatment adherence of most health care consumers, clinicians must consider life style, personality, behavioral and treatment regime factors. Paradoxically, these factors are often a central component of the condition that the medication is intended to address. In these situations, psychological interventions are very effective in improving adherence and reducing high risk behaviours.

## Treatment Integration and Treatment Substitution

The positive effects of medications are often best achieved in tandem with psychological interventions. For example, pain management is often improved with a combination of psychological treatments and pharmaceuticals. Research has shown the same to be true for some types of depression, anxiety, behaviour problems, attention deficit disorder, etc.

In other cases, psychological interventions have been shown to be superior to the effects of medication. For example, Cognitive Behaviour Therapy is the treatment of choice for some forms of depression as measured by significant improvement and a reduced likelihood of relapse. Psychological interventions do not have the complication of medication side effects and are often much more cost-effective in terms of initial treatment costs and long-term costs to the health system, to employers, and to society.



## **The Importance of Ongoing Evaluation**

There is wide recognition that any effective health care initiative must have measurable outcomes. New programs must incorporate a system of accountability and a means to assess efficacy. Psychologists are trained as researchers and clinicians. This training makes them ideally suited to take an active role in the conceptualization, delivery and evaluation of health programs and services such as a provincial or national pharmacare program. In designing and implementing a pharmacare program it is critical to establish a coherent, ongoing and valid means of evaluating program outcomes and impact. This allows for continuous quality improvement as well as an assessment of cost-effectiveness.

## **Universality**

Universality, portability, and accessibility are hallmarks of Canadian healthcare. However, most rural and northern regions of the country have struggled with a chronic shortage of medical specialists, including psychiatrists and primary care physicians. A recent study commissioned by the Canadian Psychological Association revealed that in some rural regions psychologists outnumber psychiatrists by as much as 16:1. In fact, in rural P.E.I., no psychiatrists were listed, while there were 8 psychologists. Recent statistics indicated primary care physicians prescribe 75 to 85% of medications used to treat emotional or psychiatric conditions. Psychologists are well positioned to serve as consultants to primary care physicians, pharmacists and nurse practitioners, particularly in underserved rural and northern regions. Such consultations can aid in arriving at the reliable diagnoses of mental disorders and psychological factors affecting physical health, leading to the selection of the most appropriate and effective prevention or care plan. Psychologists are geographically positioned to be an integral part of a comprehensive health care system including pharmacare.

## **Summary**

Pharmacare initiatives represent necessary and laudable projects that improve the lives of millions of Canadians. As with any program, it will involve the dedication of considerable resources to achieve its impressive goals. The success of such a program will partly be determined by the care and planning invested in addressing the psychological components of health. Research and experience has shown that psychological interventions lead to improved health outcomes, lower costs, reduced suffering and increased productivity.

