Community pharmacies deserve a renaissance

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Thanks to worldwide action to make real the concept of pharmaceutical care, today pharmacists in most countries are looking forward to an expansion of their professional roles. In many healthcare systems, there is a growing realisation that pharmacists have much to offer and moves are being made to put into practice the leadership, the retraining and the resources required to help them fulfill their potential, for the benefit of patients.

In the drive to “reprofessionalise” pharmacists, there has been less action on creating an equally promising future for the community-based pharmacy. According to the thinkers behind the concept of pharmaceutical care, the pharmacist of the future will be less involved in dispensing, so little behind the concept of pharmaceutical care, the pharmacist of the future will be less involved in dispensing, so little

From the perspective of pharmacists who have spent many years dispensing medicines, the idea that there is a professional life beyond the pharmacy is appealing. However, the concept that the profession can exist outside its historical place of work is an unproven ideal. Given current demand, a proportion of the profession could work with patients on a regular basis, reviewing their medicines. But, there is a limit to the number of pharmacists that are needed to work as “knowledge managers” outside their traditional homes. Moreover, if money is released from dispensing to fund medicines optimisation and other activities for patients, healthcare commissioners may decide that doctors or nurses should be employed (instead of pharmacists) to do this work. Could it be easier to train a doctor or nurse in pharmacology and related skills than to train pharmacists in diagnostic, medicines and all the other things they need to know to work with patients safely and effectively?

Technology is everything

In any profession, the exploration of new roles must always be welcome. However, I suggest that an equal effort should be put into finding new roles for pharmacists. Throughout history, pharmacies have evolved in response to customer demands and changes in technology, from new drugs to the introduction of computers. The pharmacy profession should now ask how pharmacists should evolve. Just because the outside of a pharmacy remains the same, it does not mean that the inside must do so. Instead of walking away from the community pharmacy, there should be immediate action on how best to transform its space into a technology hub ready for the future. I will not expand fully on the technological future of pharmacy here, as I have considered that subject elsewhere, but the following trends are clear:

1. Refit the “front of house” as a technology-hub that allows patients to connect with the pharmacy, local doctors, the healthcare system, pharmaceutical companies, charities, other patients and the like
2. Exploit the time that patients wait for their prescriptions by connecting them to a technology-enabled task, such as reporting on their medicines use, watching an interactive educational programme, completing a questionnaire, or being an expert-patient in a study
3. Network the pharmacy hub into the wider healthcare community, including providers, patient groups and private companies — and by doing so become the port of first call for patients — and coordinate their care through the pharmacy’s technology enabled network
4. Retrain pharmacists in healthcare technology not just medicines optimisation
5. Educate and enable the public to become technology-enabled pharmacy users

The notion of a technology-enabled pharmacy must prove itself in practice. However, the argument is clear: although individual pharmacists are focusing on new roles for the craft of pharmacy, there is now an urgent need to match this focus with a technology-enabled new lease of life — a renaissance for the community pharmacy.

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we can now scan our own groceries. In relation to pharmacy, this direction suggests that community pharmacy shelves should be cleared of commercial goods, turning the premises into a hub for technology-enabled patients. I suggest the following five steps for creating an innovative model of a technology-enabled pharmacy:

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