The Role of Psychiatric Pharmacists in Increasing Access to Mental Health Care

The College of Psychiatric and Neurologic Pharmacists (CPNP) is a professional association of over 2,500 psychiatric specialty pharmacists. CPNP’s mission is to advance the reach and practice of psychiatric pharmacy and serve as the voice of the specialty, while its vision is a world where all individuals living with psychiatric, neurologic, and substance use disorders receive safe, appropriate, and effective treatment.

Background

- Currently, 1 in 5 adults in the United States are living with mental illness, resulting in $193 billion in annual costs. Nearly 60 percent of those adults are not receiving appropriate mental health services.\(^1\)
- Unfortunately, obtaining timely psychiatric care and services is frequently difficult. One reason for this is due to a shortage of mental health providers across the nation. The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) has identified 4,627 mental health care professional shortage areas around the United States.\(^2\)
- Patients with a diagnosis of serious mental illness, such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, often have much shorter life expectancies than their counterparts. Serious mental illnesses can reduce life expectancy up to 20 years.\(^3\)
- There are numerous factors which contribute to this trend of shorter life expectancy, including:
  - Patients with mental illness have more difficulty navigating the health care system and are less likely to obtain follow-up care; and/or
  - Patients may have multiple co-occurring health conditions, including substance use disorders, which make their treatment more complex.

Overview of Psychiatric Pharmacists

- The health care system is evolving to meet the growing demand for mental health services and reduced costs. Psychiatric pharmacists can help meet these demands by working with physicians as part of collaborative teams to improve medication-related outcomes for patients with psychiatric, neurologic, and substance use disorders.
- Psychiatric pharmacists have expertise in the treatment of psychiatric, neurologic, and substance use disorders. This specialized knowledge is obtained through residency training or equivalent experience following the completion of a Doctor of Pharmacy degree. Many psychiatric pharmacists earn board certification as Board Certified Psychiatric Pharmacists (BCPP) through the Board of Pharmacy Specialties.
- Psychiatric pharmacists work as caregivers and treatment team members but also in decision-making and leadership roles in state and federal organizations, academia, and industry.
Psychiatric Pharmacists on the Health Care Team

- Patients cared for by an interdisciplinary team including psychiatric pharmacists, can benefit from a unique skill set that complements other members of the interprofessional team, including physicians, behavioral health providers, and nurses.
- Psychiatric pharmacists work in inpatient, outpatient, primary care, and psychiatric care settings providing direct patient care, including medication management for a full range of patient conditions and medications.
- Psychiatric pharmacists focus on optimizing the use of all medications including prescription drugs, over-the-counter medications, and supplements to ensure that they are appropriate, effective, safe, and can be taken as intended.
- Treatment teams can benefit from having a psychiatric pharmacist as a resource for consultations, drug information, and providing medication education for the patient and the patient’s family or caregivers.
- Psychiatric pharmacists promote preventive health care, medication adherence, and lifestyle modification.

Filling the Gap and Improving Patient Outcomes

- With a significant mental health care professional shortage in the US, psychiatric pharmacists offer another resource to improve outcomes for patients with psychiatric, neurologic, or substance use disorders.
- Incorporating psychiatric pharmacists into interprofessional teams in a wide spectrum of practice settings provides expertise that is needed when facing the complex medical conditions that patients with psychiatric, neurologic, and/or substance use disorders have.
- Value provided by psychiatric pharmacists includes improvements in patient symptoms, increased medication adherence rates, increased patient satisfaction, and the potential to reduce health care costs.  

Conclusion

- Patients with psychiatric, neurologic and substance use disorders are currently confronted with a health care system that may lack mental health providers and be unable to meet their unique needs.
- These patients deserve the high-quality, evidence-based, measurement-driven, comprehensive care that psychiatric pharmacists can provide as an integral member of interprofessional teams.
- Psychiatric pharmacists are an underutilized resource on the frontlines providing direct patient care, optimizing medication outcomes, and supporting fellow health care colleagues in primary care and mental health.

1 http://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Mental-Health-By-the-Numbers
2 http://kff.org/other/state-indicator/mental-health-care-health-professional-shortage-areas-hpsas/?currentTimeframe=0
3 https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/05/140523082934.htm