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# Exploring Accessibility of Community Pharmacy Services

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# Exploring accessibility of community pharmacy services

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**Abstract**
*Objective: To use selected literature to describe strengths and opportunities for improvement related to accessibility of health services in the community pharmacy setting.*
*Summary: Pharmacists have been described as one of the most accessible health care professionals, particularly as nearly 90% of Americans live within 5 miles of a community pharmacy.  However, geography alone does not provide access to health services. Individuals must be able to gain entry into the health care system, access a health care location where needed services are provided, and find a health care provider with whom the patient can communicate and trust.  Current and potential opportunities for community pharmacists to increase access via each step are described.*
*Conclusion: Community pharmacists are highly accessible health care professionals who are trusted by patients.  Opportunities exist to further increase access to dispensing and non-dispensing services in order to better meet the needs of the public.*

## Introduction

Pharmacists have been described as one of the most accessible health care professionals.[1,2]  This is particularly relevant in the community setting as nearly 90% of Americans live within 5 miles of a community pharmacy.[3]  However, geography alone does not provide access to health services. A public health framework has been developed that describes the steps involved in accessing health services, including: (1) gaining entry into the health care system, (2) accessing a health care location where needed services are provided, and (3) finding a health care provider with whom the patient can communicate and trust.[4]  The purpose of this article is to use selected literature to describe strengths and opportunities for improvement related to accessibility of health services in the community pharmacy setting in the context of these three steps.

## Accessing health services

*Gaining entry into the health care system*
While the number of uninsured individuals in the United States has been decreasing due to implementation of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, approximately 13% of individuals continue to lack health insurance coverage.[5]  The majority of uninsured individuals report that obtaining coverage is cost prohibitive, particularly in the 22 states choosing not to expand Medicaid coverage.[6,7]  Lack of insurance coverage leads to issues such as fewer preventive care services, delayed diagnoses of serious illnesses, and poorer management of chronic health conditions, leading to overall worse health outcomes and a shorter life expectancy.[8]

Pharmacists in the community setting are frequently familiar with the health and prescriptions insurance options available within their communities and can help to increase accessibility to this information, such as providing the information directly to patients in need or by referring patients to local organizations that are designed to meet this community need.  It has been well established that the US health care system is complex and can be difficult to navigate. Over one-third of the population has basic or below basic health literacy, making it difficult for the individual to obtain, understand, and use information in order to make decisions about their health care.[9]  Individuals with low health literacy are less likely to engage in preventive services, are more likely to have uncontrolled chronic conditions, have high rates of hospitalization, and have higher health care costs.[9] Pharmacists may be in a position to help patients navigate the health care system, such as by providing information about insurance options.  Additionally, there may be opportunities for pharmacists to provide preventive services, such as immunizations, tobacco cessation programs, healthy diet and exercise information, and point-of-care testing to patients who may have difficulty accessing a primary care provider.

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Even individuals with insurance coverage may have difficulty or be unable to afford needed health services. Pharmacists may serve as a resource for patients in need, such as by directing them to additional health resources including Extra Help or State Pharmaceutical Assistance Programs.[10,11] The pharmacist can also review the online prescription drug formulary for patients with health insurance in order to recommend more cost effective therapies to the prescriber. Furthermore, discount programs and medication assistance programs may help increase the accessibility of drug therapies.

*Accessing a health care location where needed services are provided*
After gaining entry into the health care system, an individual must be able to receive services that are needed at an accessible location. While community pharmacies are common throughout the United States, there is growing recognition that their distribution and provision of services may not be equitable. For example, a recent study in Chicago found that there were fewer pharmacies in minority communities compared with white or integrated communities and that the disparity is worsening.[12] The researchers concluded that public policy changes should be considered, such as increased prescription reimbursement rates for community pharmacies located within pharmacy deserts and including pharmacies in community health centers. Disparities can also exist within communities that appear that have an adequate distribution of communities pharmacies. For example, a study in the Detroit, Michigan area found that zip codes with higher average incomes had lower cash prices for generic drug pricing, more pharmacies offering discount generic drug programs, increased hours of operation, and more immunization services compared to lower income zip codes.[13]

Community pharmacies continue to seek out opportunities to expand their non-dispensing services, such as medication therapy management and preventive services.[14,15] While some pharmacy services are being focused on at a national level, pharmacies should consider local needs as well. Community pharmacies may consider partnering with organizations, such as the local public health department, in order to conduct a needs assessment designed to identify gaps in access to services and to promote justice in the distribution of health services.[16] Stakeholders such as community members, health care providers, and social service providers should be included in the assessment in order to increase the likelihood that the new services are needed and that appropriate patients will be referred.

Access may be further increased by delivering appropriate services using telehealth technologies, such as over the phone or via videoconferencing, particularly in areas with limited access to needed pharmacy services or among patients with difficulty traveling to the pharmacy.[17,18] Pharmacies must ensure that these innovative technologies are allowed under federal and state law, are Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) compliant, and that the technology is allowed according to the entities providing reimbursement for the service.

In addition to ensuring that patients can access health services, it is important to consider the quality of the services being provided. Potential considerations include having standardized training, necessary supplies, appropriate physical space, time outside of the dispensing workflow, and sufficient patient volume to ensure that the service is financially viable and that the pharmacist can maintain competence. Individual pharmacists may consider demonstrating their competency externally such as by obtaining board certification, a certification specific to a process (e.g., medication therapy management) or disease states (e.g., diabetes management).[19-21] Additionally, community pharmacies may consider applying for accreditation in order to demonstrate their commitment to providing high quality care.[22,23]

*Finding a health care provider with whom the patient can communicate and trust*
The final step needed to access needed health services is to identify a health care provider with whom the patient can communicate and trust. Multiple factors impact the ability of the patient or caregiver and pharmacist to engage in effective bi-directional communication. Nearly 9% of people in the United States speak English less than very well, which can lead to communication barriers for the patient and pharmacist. Many states require that pharmacists counsel (or offer to counsel) and provide written information regarding medications in at least some situations. Pharmacies could explore strategies to effectively communicate, such as translation programs and services.[24]

Structural barriers (e.g., lack of a private counseling area) can make providing high quality patient care difficult, such as by deterring patients and pharmacists from engaging in conversations involving sensitive subjects and limiting the ability of the pharmacist to provide non-dispensing services (e.g., immunizations and comprehensive medication reviews). In the traditional workflow process, patients may feel uncomfortable informing the pharmacy technician that they have a question, particularly if the pharmacist appears busy. Some community pharmacies are taking steps to decrease barriers to patient counseling by moving pharmacists from behind the counter to be physically closer to patients.[25] Additional strategies include using plain language, visuals,

open-ended questions, and the teach-back method to check for patient understanding.[26]

A second component of this step requires that the patient trust their health care professional. The public has historically viewed pharmacists as being very honest and ethical.[27] There are steps that pharmacists can take in order to continue to be viewed in this light. For example, recognizing patient diversity and providing culturally competent care can help to increase trust.[28] Pharmacists could seek to understand and address their personal biases, particularly related to prescribing of medications such as narcotics. Finally, as the role of the community pharmacist continues to expand into the provision of non-dispensing services, care must be taken to recognize and manage any perceived or potential conflicts of interest that may arise. For example, pharmacists should be careful not to let reimbursement rates for products influence their recommendations during medication therapy management sessions.

**Conclusion**

Community pharmacists are highly accessible health care professionals who are trusted by patients. Opportunities exist to further increase access to dispensing and non-dispensing community pharmacy-based services in order to better meet the needs of the public.

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