

FACT SHEET

WHAT DOES A HOSPITAL PHARMACIST DO?

Almost 2000 pharmacists are employed by hospitals across Australia. Although some of their work is behind the scenes, pharmacists play a key role in the hospital healthcare team and almost everyone who has been to hospital would have received services from the pharmacists who work there. The primary role of hospital pharmacists is to promote the safe and effective use of medicines – whether it is supplying drugs to patients, preparing special treatments, or providing specialist advice about drug therapy.

Supply of Medications

As Australian hospitals purchase almost \$500 million worth of pharmaceuticals each year, the traditional work of hospital pharmacists, the supply and distribution of medications, remains a very important one. It is the responsibility of the pharmacy department to order the correct amount and type of medications and to see that the medications are stored safely and securely. Pharmacists ensure that medications which may be critical to a patient's health are available when and where they are needed.

Every day, patients in Australian hospitals receive treatment with hundreds of different medications. Hospital pharmacists not only dispense medications for these patients, but also coordinate the transport and storage of medications to areas such as operating theatres and casualty departments. When it is time to leave hospital, a supply of medications is prepared for each patient, so they go home with the medications they need.

Preparation of Specialised Medications in Hospitals

An important service provided by hospital pharmacists is the manufacture of specialised medications. This most often involves cancer chemotherapy and injections such as antibiotics which are given through a 'drip'. By preparing these drugs in a sterile environment, pharmacists reduce the risks associated with their use and save valuable resources. Pharmacists also often prepare medications in mixture form for children and unconscious patients who cannot swallow tablets and may not otherwise be able to complete their treatment.

Advice and Counselling from Hospital Pharmacists

Hospital pharmacists provide medication counselling for patients and 'dispense' advice for doctors, nurses and other people in hospitals. The special training undertaken by pharmacists means that they are well equipped to provide information on the uses of specific medications, the best way to take them and how to store them to ensure they remain safe and effective. They also provide important advice about possible side effects and interactions with other medications or foods. Pharmacists' advice is particularly important for older people, children, people with multiple illnesses, or those who take many medications.

Many hospitals provide a telephone drug information service where doctors, nurses and other people can seek specialised advice from a pharmacist over the phone. Pharmacists also staff poisons information centres, where their fast and accurate advice saves hundreds of lives.

Clinical Pharmacy Services

A key role of hospital pharmacists is the provision of clinical pharmacy services, where the pharmacist works in patient care areas, such as wards, as an integral part of the healthcare team. This close contact with patients and other healthcare workers enables the pharmacist to have a direct impact on the safe and effective use of medicines. They are able to closely monitor each patient's drug therapy and work with doctors and nurses to ensure the selection of the best medication, the correct dose and duration of therapy and to monitor for and, in some cases, prevent potentially life-threatening adverse effects and drug interactions. The availability of the pharmacist on the ward also provides patients with the opportunity to ask questions and to be counselled about their medications on a daily basis.

For more information about hospital pharmacy, contact The Society of Hospital Pharmacists of Australia.
Information is also available on the World Wide Web at www.shpa.org.au

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