ETHICS AND BUSINESS IN COMMUNITY PHARMACIES – A FRAMEWORK FOR AN ETHICAL DIALOGUE

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Abstract

The community pharmacy is a health institution and a business at the same time. Pharmacists in community pharmacies often find themselves in situations that represent a conflict between professional ethics and business interests. The most frequent conflicts are related to the setting of sales targets by employers, dispensing complementary medicines, making time for patient counseling, and collecting expired medicines from patients. We believe that solving such conflicts between ethics and business requires the intervention of the pharmacists' professional associations, which should initiate a dialogue with pharmacists' employers. The objective of this paper was to propose a framework for an ethical dialogue to help these associations find solutions agreed upon by all stakeholders. Within the proposed framework, we analysed every conflict situation occurring between ethics and business using a model for ethical problem-solving and suggested common action plans for resolving these conflicts. We found that ethics and business may have common goals in community pharmacies, such as the satisfaction of patients and employed pharmacists or the sustainable development of companies. The goals may be reached by training, implication, and cooperation within the ethical dialogue framework, both at the organizational and individual levels. Our findings are useful and important for supporting initiatives of conflict resolution through collaboration between pharmacists' professional associations and employers, to identify and implement common actions in community pharmacies.

Rezumat

Farmacia comunitară este o instituție de sănătate și o afacere în același timp. Farmaciștii din farmaciile comunitare se află adesea în situații ce implică un conflict între etica profesională și interesele de afacere. Cele mai frecvente astfel de conflicte sunt legate de stabilirea unui *target* de vânzări de către angajatori, eliberarea de produse farmaceutice asociate, alocarea de timp pentru consilierea pacienților și colectarea de medicamente expirate de la populație. Considerăm că, pentru rezolvarea unor astfel de conflicte între etică și afacere, este necesară intervenția asociațiilor profesionale ale farmaciștilor, care ar trebui să inițieze un dialog cu angajatorii acestora. Lucrarea are ca scop propunerea unui cadru de dialog etic pentru a ajuta aceste asociații în identificarea unor soluții agreate de toate părțile implicate. În acest cadru, s-a analizat fiecare situație de conflict între etică și afacere, folosind un model pentru rezolvarea problemelor etice și s-au propus planuri de acțiune comună pentru rezolvarea acestor conflicte. Rezultatele cercetării noastre arată că etica și afacerile pot avea țeluri comune în farmaciile comunitare, precum satisfacția pacienților și a farmaciștilor angajați sau dezvoltarea sustenabilă a firmelor. Aceste țeluri pot fi atinse prin formare, implicare și cooperare într-un cadru adecvat de dialog etic, atât la nivel organizațional, cât și la nivel individual. Aceste rezultate sunt utile și importante pentru susținerea inițiativelor de rezolvare a conflictelor prin colaborarea dintre asociațiile profesionale ale farmaciștilor și angajatorii acestora, pentru a identifica și implementa acțiuni comune în farmaciile comunitare.

Keywords: community pharmacy, pharmacists, ethics, business

Introduction

Community pharmacies provide pharmaceutical services, medicines, and other health products to patients, providing healthcare facilities and being a business at the same time. In time, they evolved from small independent units owned by pharmacists to large companies holding chain pharmacies or supermarket pharmacies, in which commercial practices and business interests have grown constantly at the expense of good pharmaceutical practices and professional ethics [4, 6, 18, 26]. Ethical competencies acquired by pharmacists during their education are heavily challenged by the business environment in which they work, even in the community pharmacy, "particularly where there are corporate values and reward systems in operation" [26]. Moreover, sometimes insufficient training for ethical decision-making in practice [1] makes them even more vulnerable to financial pressure, some of them being pushed into "moral distress" [8, 11] or suffering a "crisis of professional identity" [9]. Indeed, a very competitive environment, such as that of community pharmacies, may exacerbate the pressure and conflicts between professional pharmaceutical ethics and employers'

business interests [9, 10, 16, 18, 24, 26]. The most frequent conflicts faced by pharmacists in the community pharmacies are related to the setting of sales targets by their employers [10, 11, 19, 24], dispensing complementary medicines [9, 11, 16, 17, 19], making time for patient counselling [9, 17, 18] and collecting expired medicines from patients for proper disposal [3, 21, 24].

Dealing with such conflict situations frequently may have a major negative impact on the pharmacists' professional satisfaction and commitment to providing quality services to their patients [10, 18, 26]. Furthermore, the broadening of community pharmacy activities (e.g., medication review and management, screening, testing, and vaccination) and the development of online pharmacies (*e.g.*, internet sales, online communication with patients, providing software for health monitoring) require pharmacists to develop their ability to manage conflicts between ethics and business, including clinical *versus* commercial communication, in order to preserve the status of health professionals and protect the patients' interests [7, 10, 19, 27]. Although pharmacists perceive commercial practices as unethical [6, 11, 16-18, 24], patients do not share the same opinion when it comes to incentives or loyalty programs: "pharmacists are perceived to be ethical decision makers" [15]. The patients' trust in pharmacists comes from a long tradition of quality services and fair treatment that they experienced in community pharmacies. The change of the professional context, the community pharmacy turning into a corporate business, renouncing more and more of the services that consecrated it as a healthcare institution, increases the risk of providing low-quality services [10] and pharmacists losing their good reputation [18]. However, many authors maintain that pharmacists do not have enough training and tools to manage the complex ethical issues that occur in daily practice, including conflicts between ethics and business [1, 2, 8, 9, 16-18, 22, 24, 26].

In this context, we strongly believe that an intervention of pharmacists' professional associations is needed by inviting community pharmacists' employers to dialogue. Consequently, the aim of our paper is to propose a framework for ethical dialogue as a tool for pharmacists' professional associations to support their members by getting involved in analysing and solving conflicts between professional ethics and business in community pharmacies.

Materials and Methods

For developing the ethical dialogue framework, we chose the Stückelberger's model [20]. For exemplifying how every ethics-business conflict situation should be analysed and solved, we used the five-step model for ethical problem solving proposed by Veatch *et al.* [23].

The first step in the model for ethical problem solving is to "respond to the 'sense' or feeling that something is wrong" [23]. In our opinion, this step should be taken by the pharmacists' professional association at the national level, precisely by creating a framework for an ethical dialogue with the pharmacists' employers. Thus, the association should invite representatives of independent pharmacies, chain pharmacies, supermarket pharmacies, and their unions. The pharmacists' professional association should propose, from the beginning, a framework for an action-oriented dialogue based on their commitment to respect the fundamental values for ethical dialogues (human dignity, equality/justice, freedom, participation, sustainability, and unity in diversity), ethical compromise guidelines (e.g., seeking ethical aims, advantaging various parties, favouring the weaker ones, helping settle conflicts, having public acceptance, protecting life and human dignity), and ethical information policy (rules of confidentiality, public participation, and transparency) regarding the dialogue [20].

Once the time is scheduled and the ways of communication with the employers' representatives are agreed upon, the next step in the five-step model for ethical problem solving should be taken together to resolve each conflict between ethics and business. Thus, in the second step, all the technical, situational, legal, and regulatory information, or of an ethical nature necessary to assess each conflict to be analysed, can be collected, but only jointly. Based on this information, the third step should include the identification of an ethical problem and reflection on a moral diagnosis. In such a context of ethical dialogue, in the fourth step, in search of a resolution, the stakeholders should openly and honestly analyse the possible options of common action and identify the solutions morally acceptable by all parties involved. Once the agreement on common action is reached, they would be implemented, and the results monitored, with the fifth step being collaboration to determine the course of action [23].

Results and Discussion

The results we obtained, based on research and reflection on the application of the two models, to resolve the conflicts between ethics and business in the community pharmacies, are presented in Table I. In every country, the pharmacists' professional association represents its members and is responsible to society for the quality of their professional services. It should, therefore, be the initiator of a dialogue with the community

pharmacists' employers to resolve conflicts between
ethics and business.

<div align="right">**Table I**</div>

Resolution of conflicts between ethics and business within an ethical dialogue framework

The five-step model for ethical problem solving	**Creating the framework for an ethical dialogue for conflicts resolution:** - action-oriented dialogue: proposing an ethical framework, inviting pharmacists' employers, planning			
Respond to the sense or feeling that something is wrong	**Pharmacists' professional association – considering the:** - growing frustration of pharmacists against the pressure to increase sales in community pharmacies - decreasing quality of professional services and declining respect of society towards pharmacists - growing need for involving community pharmacists and pharmacies in environmental protection			
Gather information / make an assessment	**Conflicts between ethics and business in the community pharmacy**			
	The setting of sales targets by employers	**Dispensing complementary medicines**	**Making time for patient counselling**	**Collecting expired medicines from patients**
	Legal and ethical framework Responsibility to patients and public health Causes of conflict: - an offense to the pharmacists' professional dignity and independence - overseeing of the professional activity by a non-pharmacist	Legal and ethical framework Responsibility to patients and public health Causes of conflict: - insufficient training of pharmacists in complementary medicines - insufficient evidence of the effects of some of these products	Legal and ethical framework Responsibility to patients and public health Causes of conflict: - insufficient number of pharmacists and technicians in the community pharmacy - work overload of pharmacists, including bureaucratic tasks	Legal and ethical framework Responsibility to patients and environmental health Causes of conflict: - employers' refusal to pay for collecting and disposal of such medicines - poor regulations and low involvement of authorities
Identify the ethical problem / consider a moral diagnosis	Sales of medicines and other health products – must be regulated by the patients' health needs	Sales of medicines and other health products – must be regulated by the patients' health needs	Patient counselling – essential professional service and ethical obligation of pharmacists in the community pharmacy	Protection of the environment from drug pollution – an ethical obligation of pharmacists in the community pharmacy
Seek a resolution	Common training programs in pharmaceutical and business ethics Framework agreement on respecting the pharmacists' professional independence	Common training programs in dispensing complementary medicines Framework agreement on patient counselling when dispensing complementary medicines	Common training programs in pharmaceutical ethics and patient counselling Framework agreement on supporting counselling and exemption from bureaucratic tasks	Common training programs in environmental and public health ethics Framework agreement on developing a common program for environmental and public health protection
Work with others to determine a course of action	Implementation and monitoring of common programs – feedback / satisfaction assessment (pharmacists, employers, patients)	Implementation and monitoring of common programs – feedback / satisfaction assessment (pharmacists, employers, patients)	Implementation and monitoring of common programs – feedback / satisfaction assessment (pharmacists, employers, patients)	Implementation and monitoring of common programs – feedback / satisfaction assessment (pharmacists, employers, patients)

In developing a framework of ethical dialogue, the pharmacists' professional association should consider creating a space (real and or virtual) for honest and open communication [14, 26], in which the stakeholders involved (association and employers) could try to reach an agreement on the best ways to resolve conflicts and have a good coexistence in professional life. Within such a context, jointly established and based on voluntary participation, discussions should be carried out without fear of being accused, judged, or condemned for one's position or opinion, but rather with an open mind for the understanding and acceptance of others; because "it is through the flow of dialogue that the contents of ethical norms are generated, and their power and authority is legitimated" [14].

It is possible, of course that some employers do not respond positively to the invitation to dialogue. Nevertheless, the professional association should reach out and convince them that everyone would

have to gain in case of success [20]: the pharmacists, by ethical work satisfaction and professional achievement, and employers, by providing quality services [10], protecting public health and sustainable development, and projecting an image of clean/green companies that are socially and environmentally responsible [22, 25], which would eventually contribute to a better reputation of pharmaceutical companies.

It may be that in the first phase of the ethical dialogue, when objectives are set and problems are analysed [20], it will be necessary to assess and prioritize situations, possibly to solve 'one conflict at a time', depending on the extent of conflicts, their impact on the quality of professional services, urgency, and seriousness of the problem at the national level. During the dialogue, following an iterative process of reflection and analysis, it may be possible to discover common solutions for more than one conflict.

The ideas and proposals resulting from our research and reflection on the conflicts between ethics and business in community pharmacies are also supported by what our peers have published on this subject in the past years.

Thus, regarding the setting of sales targets by community pharmacists' employers, other authors have shown that such a policy by the company challenges pharmacists' professional independence [12, 26], and the pressure of such policies could compromise their professional judgment [11]. Some authors also emphasized that pharmacists perceived these practices as a threat to their professional dignity and, even more, in the pharmacies in which "the culture of the organization was one where the pressure to meet targets was perceived as excessive or as prioritizing profit over meeting patient needs, this was viewed as detrimental to service quality" [10]. On the one hand, we consider that professional associations should facilitate pharmacists' access to special training in the ethical field with reflective exercises and case studies, which, as demonstrated by other authors, could help them better handle current constraints in community pharmacies [2, 8, 12, 19]. On the other hand, pharmacists' employers should develop organizational cultures that support team development to ensure a good working environment and quality of pharmaceutical services [10].

Regarding dispensing complementary medicines, it has become a common practice in many countries to increase sales in community pharmacies, more or less accompanied by counselling [9, 11, 16, 17]. Indeed, the explosion in the number of such products on the market makes it difficult to keep knowledge up to date, even by professionals such as pharmacists, used to search and select proper scientific information. However, "the sale of complementary medicines without rigorous scientific evidence for effectiveness raises important ethical concerns regarding the responsibilities of pharmacists" [17]. Consequently, we totally agree with the necessity of developing an ethical framework for training pharmacists for dispensing complementary medicines because, unlike the salespersons in convenience stores and supermarkets, pharmacists in the community pharmacies have "professional responsibilities regarding evidence-based practice and supporting positive health outcomes" [16]. Several authors have underlined the importance of patients' autonomy to be observed by pharmacists, but also the obligation to provide correct information about the effectiveness of complementary medicines they requested, to enable patients to make an informed decision to buy and use these products [8, 16-18, 24]. We consider that adequate ethical training becomes even more important in the context of maintaining sales targets, which makes patients even more vulnerable if not properly informed.

As regards counselling, it is an essential service provided by pharmacists in the community pharmacy, with the aim to protect patients from the risks of medicine use [2, 12, 13, 18] and from the risks of using products whose effectiveness has not been documented [16, 17]. In the context of the increasing diversity of products in the community pharmacy and the complexity of the activities of the medical team, we support the necessity of continuous ethical training in communication and counselling [12, 18]. Patient education through counselling, including helping to find quality information online by themselves, might contribute, in the medium and long run, to a more effective activity in community pharmacies. Until then, however, we join the authors who suggest that employers should reconsider staff policies and minimize the pharmacists' administrative tasks, which are often indicated as being the cause of giving up counselling, to allow more time for communication with the patients, which "would be more likely to improve patient outcomes (e.g., adherence) and reduce waste" [10]. We can only quote the memorable words of our peers, to which we fully subscribe: "Adequate counselling protects the welfare and dignity of patients and brings a human element to an occupation that continually struggles to meet business objectives" [18].

Collecting expired medicine from patients represents a patchy and random activity in countries that do not have robust environmental protection policies; therefore, no waste collection systems are established by law, for which pharmaceutical companies are responsible [3, 21, 24]. Other authors have mentioned a similar conflict in more developed countries, namely, the reluctance of certain

companies to accept supplying/collecting specific devices to/from drug misusers/abusers in community pharmacies [26]. A project of the pharmacists' professional association to promote public health and the development of environmental ethics within community pharmacies would also contribute to the education of the population in this respect, as we have maintained in previous studies [22]. We strongly believe in a probable positive response from pharmacists' employers to the proposal of the professional association to build a common project of environmental and public health protection, not only because of economic reasons but also because of the moral legitimation of this purpose [7, 25]. In fact, the extent to which pharmaceutical companies will assume their social and environmental responsibilities will also reflect the success of the ethical dialogue between the stakeholders [20].

The agreement of common training programs and the commitment to implement common actions have also been recommended by other authors, who emphasized the necessity of continuous efforts for ethical professional development of pharmacists, namely the creation of a framework of persuasion and resilience in the context of financial pressures, both in developing countries [4, 8, 9, 11, 22, 24] and in more advanced countries, especially where pharmacists' roles in community pharmacies are expanding [1, 5, 18, 19, 26].

In the process of establishing the content of common training, providing them in an experiential context, and assessing their results based on the skills and abilities acquired, collaboration with academic institutions could be useful [1, 5, 8, 16, 26], which would constitute a long-term beneficial partnership for everyone involved, as well as for the future of pharmaceutical education. Implementation of ethical training and common action programs will require monitoring and effectiveness assessment according to a commonly agreed protocol, which should also include the patients' perspective [15], to obtain a complete picture of their impact and allow for necessary adjustments regularly.

Conclusions

Pharmacists in community pharmacies are often confronted with difficult decisions in situations of conflict between their professional ethics and the employers' business interests. A better, more consistent management of such situations requires collaboration between all stakeholders based on mutual respect. The pharmacists' professional association should intervene in support of their members to create a framework of ethical dialogue with the community pharmacists' employers. Within this framework, the analysis of situations of conflict

between ethics and business should be made with honesty and the will to find a commonly agreed upon resolution. Developing pharmacists' training in ethics and collaboration between employers and professional associations to devise and implement common action plans are essential for conflict resolution. Ethics and business may have common goals in community pharmacies, such as patient satisfaction, pharmacists' professional satisfaction, and sustainable development. These goals may be achieved by training, implication, and cooperation within the framework of ethical dialogue, both at the institutional and individual levels. Our findings are useful and important because we propose the resolution of conflicts through cooperation with the purpose of identifying and implementing common action programs that aim for pharmacists to provide quality services to their patients and for pharmacies to protect public health and the environment.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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