

# Exploring the safe and effective supply and use of non-prescription medicines

DR MARGARET C. WATSON

SENIOR RESEARCH FELLOW, DEPARTMENT OF GENERAL PRACTICE AND  
PRIMARY CARE, UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN, SCOTLAND, UK

## REZUMAT

Autoarea a folosit metode noi și complexe pentru a cerceta siguranța și furnizarea de NPM (medicamente fără prescriere), dezvoltarea și evaluarea intervențiilor lor, pentru a îmbunătăți furnizarea acestora, și mai ales pentru a demonstra o teorie originală conform căreia aceste medicamente sunt foarte importante pentru îngrijire, în primul rând. Rolul lor este subestimat la ora actuală, astfel încât depozitele de asemenea medicamente, în farmaciile obișnuite sunt sub nivelul necesar.

Studiul dorește să crească siguranța și efectivitatea utilizării medicamentelor fără prescriere – NPM.

## ABSTRACT

I have used novel and mixed methods to explore the safe and effective supply of NPMs, and to develop and evaluate interventions to improve their supply, particularly with my use of theory to underpin my research programme. I firmly believe in adopting a rigorous and systematic approach to pharmacy practice research, and I intend to continue to do so as I lead and develop my research programme.

## INTRODUCTION

My career in health services and pharmacy practice research started with my MSc project in 1988 which aimed to reduce the number of hospital patients discharged on benzodiazepines. In 1994, I formalised my research knowledge and experience by undertaking and completing my PhD titled *The Development, Implementation and Evaluation of Prescribing Guidelines in General Practice*, in the Department of Social Medicine and Division of Primary Health Care, University of Bristol. The purpose of this PhD was to develop evidence-based prescribing guidelines for non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and to compare different guideline implementation strategies to determine which, if any, were effective in changing general practitioners' prescribing behaviour. Since my PhD, I have developed my research portfolio regarding the Safe and Effective Supply And use of Medicines (SESAME). Much of this research involves non-prescription medicines (NPMs). The primary aims of this programme are to identify influences on the supply of NPMs and to develop strategies to improve their safe and effective supply.

## NON-PRESCRIPTION MEDICINES

NPMs are an important component of self-care. As more medicines are reclassified, and as their potency increases, there is growing need to ensure the safe and effective supply of these medicines from community pharmacies (and other outlets). There is empirical evidence that NPMs are associated with substantial iatrogenic disease, and this is an area where I have undertaken preliminary exploration and that I am currently developing. My research shows that the supply of NPMs from community pharmacies is sometimes suboptimal, and that the reasons for this are many. I have demonstrated, qualitatively and quantitatively, that communication during consultations for NPMs is a major determinant of the outcome in terms of safety and effectiveness. Medicine counter assistants (MCAs) are involved with the majority of consultations for NPMs, but receive predominantly paper-based training as part of their MCA qualification, which does not address communication skills training needs. It is only relatively recently that communication skills training has been provided for pharmacists, and this initiative is one that requires expansion to include pharmacy support staff. I led a research study to evaluate the

effect of communication skills training for MCAs on the outcome of NPM consultations, the results of which are being used to develop a definitive randomised controlled trial (RCT) of this intervention. The study used simulated patient methodology to derive measures of communication behaviour, which is a method that I have often used to measure behaviour and behaviour change.

Patient safety is currently receiving considerable attention, and the safe use of medicines is of major importance. The high volume of sales of NPMs has implications for patient safety. By highlighting the importance of effective communication during consultations, and developing strategies to improve pharmacy staff and consumer communication, I hope to improve the safe and effective use of NPMs. Effective communication is essential throughout all aspects of health care, and the results of my studies may be relevant to self-care consultations conducted by other health professionals. Furthermore, my research has also highlighted the need for ensuring that pharmacy support staff are appropriately trained in order to maximise their role in the supply of NPMs.

### **APPLYING THEORY TO THE DEVELOPMENT AND EVALUATION OF RESEARCH INITIATIVES**

Pharmacy practice research is often criticised for a lack of theoretical underpinning to the development, delivery and evaluation of interventions and services. I have used psychological theory, including theory of planned behaviour and human error theory, as well as organizational theory, to explore influences on the supply and use of medicines. The importance of theory is highlighted in the Medical Research Council's (MRC's) framework for complex interventions, as is the stepwise and iterative

approach to developing interventions to change behaviour. I have used this framework throughout my research programme.

### **FUTURE RESEARCH**

The influence of the consumer/patient is important, affecting the outcome of consultations and influencing staff behaviour. Interventions need to elicit behaviour change amongst consumers during their consultations for NPMs, to ensure that they receive appropriate, safe, effective and, where possible, evidence-based, advice regarding their treatment with (or without) NPMs. I am the principal grant-holder on a current study which is using mixed research methods to explore consumers' perceptions about MCAs, providing information to MCAs during consultations, and the safety of NPMs. A national survey will test the results of the preliminary part of this investigation. This survey, as well as the elicitation interviews that were used in its development, employ the theory of planned behaviour as a framework for these investigations. These results will be used to develop and evaluate strategies to change consumers' communication during consultations, i.e. to provide more-relevant information to pharmacy staff. These strategies will include theoretical approaches to the development and evaluation of the interventions.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to thank all the individuals and organisations that have enabled me to undertake and develop my research career over the year, including academic, clinical and other colleagues, without whom the research I have conducted would not have been possible.