

Health Advocacy: What pharmacists can do towards the realization of Universal Healthcare Coverage (UHC)

Odhiambo David

Ryiculture Health and Social Innovation, Kenya

Introduction

Health advocacy refers to the activities directed towards ensuring individuals and communities have access to healthcare that they need at any particular time. It involves creating awareness of the deficiencies, mobilizing resources towards addressing them, addressing inequities, and influencing policies as well as creating systems for sustained quality access (US National Library of Medicine, 2017). Advocacy helps raise familiarity with an issue which calls for individual and social actions in order to gain political commitment, policy support, social acceptance and structural support for a particular intervention e.g. a public health initiative such as improving access to sexual and reproductive health services (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2009).

Health advocates are required to support and promote the rights of patients in healthcare settings, help build capacity to improve community health and enhance health policy initiatives focused on availability of safe, effective and quality healthcare services.

Pharmacists being experts in medicines have an essential role in promoting access to healthcare services through different avenues in which they are called upon to practice professionally. They are involved in designing, creating or manufacturing of a drug product, dispensing of a drug, managing and planning of a pharmaceutical care plan. They are experts on the action and uses of drugs, including their chemistry, pharmacology, the formulation of medicines. They are thus mandated with the responsibility of promoting health through participation in; pharmaceutical care, pharmacy inventory management, systems management and public health practice (Mitchel Otieno Okumu, 2017).

What we can do as pharmacists in health advocacy?

Pharmacists can play varied roles as pertains health advocacy most of which are aligned to the practice settings in which they are required to deliver their professional services. These include; community pharmacy, clinical pharmacy, research and drug development, drug regulation, pharmaceutical manufacture, governance and management, and pharmaceutical marketing.

The need for active involvement in health advocacy can not be overemphasized considering access to healthcare all over the world is plagued by related shortfalls such as high costs of care e.g. in the US the cost of healthcare per person per year in 2017 was averaged at \$10,224 which was the highest globally and this hasn't changed (Cox, 2018). Other crucial impediments to healthcare access include lack of medicines especially in the developing countries, global surge in non-communicable diseases, minimal involvement of medical professionals especially pharmacists in governance and politics in different countries leading to policy shortfalls as there is a detachment in policy provisions and practice demands, dismal participation by patients at the point of care and lack of accountability by governments to citizens in delivering their mandate of promoting access to healthcare among others.

Pharmacists have a substantial role to play in health advocacy in efforts to shape healthcare delivery and strive to achieve UHC. The

various roles we can play in this front include:

1. Role of Pharmacists in Formulary Management

Pharmacists as medicines experts are knowledgeable on medicines for use in different conditions which based on different epidemiological presentation of diseases, they can optimize inventory management through the practice of essential drug list (EDL) concept. This will help in lowering the cost of care as the drugs under any national formulary and EDL should be low-cost (affordable), efficacious, safe and of the right quality which improves treatment outcomes in care. As health advocates it is the role of pharmacists to stand up and take centre stage in the coordination of medicines procurement policies, EDL & national formulary development at different stages to ensure they meet the local needs to be served by the same. This should be extended to the local practice facilities in different countries as has been made manifest in Kenya where a pharmacist is the secretary to the Medicines and Therapeutics Committee (MTC) responsible for developing hospital formularies and guiding the procurement of medical appliances, equipment and medicines (Dorothy Aywak, 2017).

2. Role of Pharmacists in Patient Education and Health Sensitization

Community pharmacists have been the first point of contact for patients whenever they have any medical concerns. This provides an avenue for pharmacists to deliver their mandate with due diligence through active engagement of the patient in care by getting more information from them and at the same time providing them with the right information that will enable them lead healthy lives thus improved health status of the communities. Pharmacists in these settings should empower the patient and encourage them to seek more information during their care and by extension encourage them to always be actively engaged in their care. This will be essential in capping the cost of care as the patient gets to choose among different treatment options e.g. generic drugs other than branded drugs or even oral dosage forms instead of parenteral formulations which would call for extra administration costs. This has been the mainstay of the work we are doing in our health advocacy program as Ryiculture Health and Social Innovation, a social enterprise run by a team of pharmacy students in Kenya where we educate the public on their responsibility in improving access to healthcare.

3. Role of Pharmacists in Community Education and Public Health Campaigns

Pharmacists can work with public health committees where as medical specialists they can use their authority in health advocacy and promote public health through interventions geared towards serving the needs of the communities. These could be through public health campaigns on emerging medical concerns e.g. Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR) spanning improved access to contraceptives, contraceptive use promotion, safe abortions and safe sex. Other issues of concerns include mental health, female genital mutilation, water, sanitation & hygiene (WASH), drug use and drug abuse, agricultural chemical use and antimicrobial resistance scourge.

4. Role of Pharmacists in Multidisciplinary Teams

Pharmacists should be actively engaged in multidisciplinary medical teams in hospitals where they should leverage their medical expertise and improve treatment outcomes through medication therapy monitoring (MTM) services, rational prescribing, medicine reconciliatory services, among others. They also should work in these teams in concerted efforts to promote patient involvement in care since in most cases they are the last person a patient sees before leaving the hospital and can build their confidence in care given in situations where psychological factors and beliefs influence drug use behaviours.

5. Role of Pharmacists in Public Policy and Governance

Public policy and governance drive national decisions and interventions to be undertaken in servicing healthcare needs which unless driven by medical professionals in the associated field of practice would be detached from the practice demands hence inadequacies. This has plagued several African states where policies are aligned to political regimes goals and crafted with political influences as depicted by the comparative study on public policy and administration in Kenya and Tanzania in post-colonial era, (Hyden,

1995). This calls for pharmacists to be actively engaged in the development of policies and governance so as to promote access to healthcare through government facilitation of the same. To achieve this, pharmacists must be able to develop advocacy skills and be good at lobbying for right to health for the public.

Conclusion

Championing for health reforms aligned to promoting access to healthcare services, reducing inequalities in care, reducing morbidity and mortality, and healthy living are at the centre of health advocacy where pharmacists should be at the drivers' seat. The benefits attributed to active pharmacists' involvement in care as discussed include improved access to healthcare services, improved public participation in healthcare, sound health policies and health resource management among others.

The active participation and involvement of pharmacists in health advocacy thus forms a benchmark and a key driver for attainment of UHC.