Migration of direct responsibility for surgical products away from pharmacists

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Background
The surge in the use of surgical products in hospitals has contributed to an increased responsibility for such products for pharmacists. Pharmacists now receive more questions from patients and other healthcare professionals regarding surgical products. This necessitates that they become knowledgeable about the descriptions, uses, quality, and safety aspects of these products. This makes it imperative for pharmacists to keep themselves updated with current developments in this area.

Role of pharmacists
A fundamental purpose of pharmaceutical services in any setting is to ensure the safe and appropriate use of medication and medication-related products. Pharmacists play a role in ensuring safety, efficacy, and quality of medicines and medical devices. Pharmacists have a range of responsibilities, from dispensing medications to monitoring patient health and drawing up specific pharmaceutical care plans to ensure individual patients derive maximum benefit from their therapies. Pharmacists’ responsibilities include decisions and actions with respect to the evaluation, procurement, storage, distribution, and administration of all of these products.

Challenges
Medical devices are an important part of modern medical care. They are essential for patient care at all levels, whether in wards, in clinics and even specialised hospitals. The medical devices market is showing double digit growth. The lack of evidence based decision making influences the uptake and circulation of medical devices. They are also known to add to the financial burden on the public health sector. The government is faced with the challenge of providing quality service and managing health budgets, but so are medical schemes.

Stringent regulation should ensure the quality of medical devices. Medical devices should meet the highest safety and quality standards. These standards are intended to protect the user against risks associated with design, manufacture and packaging of medical devices. However, pharmacovigilance in respect of medical devices is almost non-existent. Substandard medical devices seem to be a widespread problem, which may lead to serious consequences for the health of vulnerable populations. Therefore education and quality assurance programs are essential for all stakeholders. Pharmacists are not generally offered much training on medical devices, thus the lack of awareness of various medical devices used in hospitals.

Problem statement
The extent of involvement by hospital pharmacists in the supply management of surgical products varies in different settings and has not been clearly defined. Do pharmacists have the basic knowledge of these products? Does this responsibility overload pharmacists? Is it an opportunity for acquiring new skills and expansion of knowledge?

Method
A questionnaire was drafted and emailed countrywide to pharmacists in both public and private sectors to assess the current practices with regards to managing surgical products. This assessment determined if pharmacists had the correct knowledge, skills and expertise to manage surgical products. It also looked into the supply chain management of surgical products.

Results and discussion
Demographics
A total of 105 questionnaires were returned (Figure 1). All the provinces were represented. In terms of sector representation, 28% of pharmacists who responded came from the private sector, and 72% from the public sector.

Figure 1: Provincal distribution of respondents
Current practices

62% of the respondents reported that they are dispensing and receiving enquiries on surgical products. 42% of the respondents said they provide advice on the use of surgical products. Pharmacy was cited as one of the departments in the hospital responsible for surgical products, according to 47% of the respondents. 60% of the respondents were equivocal about whether pharmacists are the relevant personnel to manage surgical products, and whether this competency should not be under the scope of practice of pharmacists.

Pharmacists' perceptions

More than 60% of respondents stated that if surgical products are managed by pharmacists, supply chain efficiency, stock control and stock availability will improve (Figure 2). However, the majority of the respondents indicated that the management of surgical products by pharmacists will increase workload and reduce space in the pharmacy.

The feedback received from the respondents regarding current supply chain performance was varied and is summarised in Figure 4.

Conclusion

The perceived notion in the current South African health context is that pharmacists are ideally placed to manage surgical products because of the available storage area and their expertise in pharmaceutical supply chain management. Since the surgical products sector is dynamic and fast-growing, pharmacists need to advance their knowledge of surgical products to ensure effective and efficient supply chain management. Nurses also need to advance their knowledge of supply management. The surgical product supply chain is characterized by uncertainty and indifference; therefore to ensure its sustainability and efficient management, the focus will have to be on building human and structural capacity.

References