

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

USING BEHAVIOURAL THEORY TO DEVELOP AND EVALUATE A COMMUNICATIONS SKILLS TRAINING PACKAGE FOR MEDICINE COUNTER ASSISTANTS

Researchers

Watson MC, Inch J, Cleland J, Francis J, Bond CM

Aim

Community pharmacies are able to sell a wider range of medicines to the public, many of which were formerly only available on prescription. Research previously carried out indicates that the sale of nonprescription medicines (NPMs) by medicine counter assistants (MCAs) is not always appropriate and does not always comply with the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain (RPSGB) guidelines for the safe and effective supply of these medicines. This study used a psychological theory to develop and evaluate a communications skills package aimed at improving information exchange (communication) between MCAs and patients in community pharmacies.

Project Outline/Methodology

MCAs were recruited from community pharmacies in Grampian and allocated to either the intervention group (to receive training) or the control group. Up to two MCAs from each pharmacy could participate. The intervention group were invited to attend two communications skills training events. A training package was developed using a psychological theory and was delivered using a mixture of techniques including: taught sessions; group discussion and role-play. The effect of the training was assessed by two different methods. The first method was a questionnaire which was developed using the same psychological theory as the training package. The second method used trained mystery shoppers. Each MCA was scheduled to receive four visits (two before the training, then one after each training session) from mystery shoppers, who wore concealed microphones to record the consultations. Following each visit, the mystery shoppers completed a data collection form. Mystery shopper outcome measures included: the total number of questions asked; the use of specific questions (from "WWHAM" which is a questioning framework used by MCAs) and compliance with RPSGB guidelines.

Key Results

In total, 93 (89.4%) of the 104 scheduled mystery shopper visits were completed. The total number of questions asked increased at each time point in the

group who received training, but remained constant and then decreased in the control group. The use of WWHAM questions also increased in the intervention group, but not in the control group. No effect was shown with compliance of RPSGB guidelines. The results from the questionnaire suggest that the training intervention had a positive effect on MCAs' intention to behave according to training recommendations.

Conclusions

Communication skills training for MCAs increased information exchange during consultations for NPMs. Increased information exchange has previously been shown to be associated with the guideline compliant supply of NPMs.

What does this study add to the field?

The results of this study suggest that communication skills training is likely to enhance MCAs' ability to gather information from consumers during consultations for NPMs. This is the first study to investigate the effect of a theory-based training package on the behaviour of MCAs during consultations for NPMs.

Implications for Practice or Policy

The reclassification of medicines as NPMs is a fundamental part of the British Government's self care initiative. It is imperative that MCAs, as the members of staff involved with the majority of consultations for these medicines, are suitably trained to support them in this role. As such, this improved communication may in turn lead to the more appropriate supply of NPMs.

Where to next?

A large scale study needs to be conducted to assess the overall effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of this method.

Further details from:

Dr M.C Watson, Department of General Practice and Primary Care, Westburn Health Centre, Westburn Road, Aberdeen AB25 2AY.
E-mail m.c.watson@abdn.ac.uk

