Assessing Current and Future Pharmacists’ Perceptions of Establishing a “Third Class” of Medications

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Introduction

In recent years, consumers have become increasingly involved in managing their own health and continue to call for greater accessibility to healthcare. Consumer access to certain prescription medications has increased with the growth in the number of Rx-to-OTC switches. Some have suggested that the movement towards consumer self-care and the intricate nature of current and future switches warrant the evaluation of developing a transitional class of medications referred to as the “Third Class of Medications.” This classification could include medications that would not require a prescription from a pharmacist and would be accessible to consumers under the supervision of a pharmacist. This classification could offer placement for medications that could potentially provide greater public health benefit through greater accessibility, such as the statins or H2 blockers, but would require guidance for use from healthcare professionals, such as pharmacists. The role of pharmacists would be significantly affected if this new drug classification were to be established. This survey evaluated pharmacy students’ and pharmacists’ general perceptions over the past day to day work concerns, and their readiness to advance the profession of pharmacy with the establishment of the “Third Class of Medications.”

Objective

To evaluate the perceptions of pharmacy students and future pharmacists (within two years of graduation) of the establishment of a “Third Class of Medications” in the United States.

Methodology

Design: A questionnaire was provided electronically via Zoonerang to certain (i) pharmacy students and (ii) pharmacy students in their first two professional years of pharmacy school. Recipients were primarily practicing in the tri-state area of New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania. E-mails with the hyperlink or hard copies of the surveys were sent to pharmacy students and preceptors from Rutgers University, St. John’s University, and the University of Sciences in Philadelphia, as well as to pharmacy students and preceptors in the tri-state area.

Additionally, respondents were invited to forward the hyperlink to the questionnaire to other pharmacists and students. Students with two or less years of community-based experience and pharmacists with no community-based experience were excluded from the analysis. Reminder e-mails were sent, and raw data was collected electronically from January 9, 2006 to February 10, 2006. Responses to the questionnaire were anonymous and confidential, with only the study authors having access to the data. Analysis of the results included cross-tabulations and filtering the subset of responses provided by community-based pharmacists with two or less years of practice in retail and/or independent pharmacies.

Survey Questions Evaluated:

- Awareness of the concept of the Third Class of Medications
- Perceived benefits of the development of a Third Class of Medications
- Perceived concerns associated with the development of a Third Class of Medications

Survey Participants:

- 609 community-based pharmacists
- 50 students

Survey Questions Evaluated:

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Results

Support for Third Class of Medications

| Respondents’ Degree of Support | 76% of all respondents were supportive of its establishment |

Benefits & Concerns

| Benefits or Concerns | 83% of all respondents agreed that it would be either very favorable or favorable |

Reported Appropriateness of Medications

| Short-Term Therapies* |

Community-based Pharmacists Support the Following Concepts Regarding the Establishment of a Third Class of Medications

- Increased medication access
- Increased patient involvement with healthcare needs
- Increased overall perception of pharmacy
- Decrease in overall healthcare costs
- Increased patient compliance

Survey Questions Evaluated:

- Perceived benefits
- Perceived concerns
- Support or opposition to the establishment

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Discussion

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In recent years, consumers have become increasingly involved in managing their own health and continue to call for greater accessibility to healthcare. Consumer access to certain prescription medications has increased with the growth in the number of Rx-to-OTC switches. Some have suggested that the movement towards consumer self-care and the intricate nature of current and future switches warrant the evaluation of developing a transitional class of medications referred to as the “Third Class of Medications.” This classification could include medications that would not require a prescription from a pharmacist and would be accessible to consumers under the supervision of a pharmacist. This classification could offer placement for medications that could potentially provide greater public health benefit through greater accessibility, such as the statins or H2 blockers, but would require guidance for use from healthcare professionals, such as pharmacists. The role of pharmacists would be significantly affected if this new drug classification were to be established. This survey evaluated pharmacy students’ and pharmacists’ general perceptions over the past day to day work concerns, and their readiness to advance the profession of pharmacy with the establishment of the “Third Class of Medications.”

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Conclusions

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The survey identified strong support for the development of a Third Class of Medications among both current and future pharmacists, including the subset of community-based pharmacists, provided that it would include suitable medications that would be monitored and managed appropriately. The perceived positive effect on the profession of pharmacy is noteworthy. Further evaluation is necessary to determine how a successful medication classification program would be implemented in a Third Class of Medications.

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References

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