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M.I. Al-Hassan
Department of Clinical Pharmacy,
College of Pharmacy,
King Saud University,
P.O. Box 2457,
Riyadh-11451,
Saudi Arabia

Tel: 00-966-4677491

A Survey on Consumer Need and Opinion about the Community Pharmacists in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

M.I. Al-Hassan

This is a questionnaire based survey designed to determine the current status of customers' views on community pharmacies in Riyadh and focus strategies to expand and promote community pharmacy services in Saudi Arabia. Personal interview survey of 187 consumers, in Riyadh city, was obtained over a period of six weeks (23rd December 2007 to 8th February 2008). The interview questionnaire was designed to ask choice of pharmacy to seek advice, the frequency and the range of health areas for which they seek advice, attitude and views of clients to six items towards pharmacists and their assistants. The results obtained revealed the following: (i) to visit a particular pharmacy, respondents claimed it was convenient due to a short distance, convenient working hours, knowledge of staff and excellent services, (ii) majority of the respondents asked for advice about Over-The-Counter (OTC) medications and prescription advice, while others visited for minor health problems. Willingness to provide advice, quicker services, competence and knowledge about medicines, were revealed to be desired qualities of pharmacists. On attitudes of the customers to a list of six items, majority showed that pharmacists are qualified as health professionals. Some strongly agree that pharmacists are not qualified to discuss with customers their health complaints. It is difficult to conclude the reasons that inhibit clients from seeking the advice of pharmacist. Possibly the lack of privacy and the supermarket style of marketing might influence in deterring the advice seekers. Thus the problem of environment for privacy must be addressed.

Key words: Consumers, personal interview, pharmacy services, promotion, strategies

INTRODUCTION

The community pharmacy services will not grow and prosper unless the pharmacists try to meet the needs of the customer who seeks service. Many studies have been designed to show the public opinion of the community pharmacist and explicitly determine for the factors (location, range of products, working hours and services) important to clients when seeking the advice of the pharmacist (Gastelurrutia *et al.*, 2006; Oparah and Kikanme, 2006; Anderson, 2007; Tinelli *et al.*, 2007). However, such issues have not been investigated in Saudi population. Hence, to provide attractive and efficient services (location, products, timings and services) for clients in community pharmacy in Saudi Arabia, factors considered important to clients need to be explored and established which are considered fundamental to the development of strategies to expand and promote community pharmacy services in Saudi Arabia.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A survey on consumer need and opinion about the community pharmacists in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia was conducted on personal interview survey of 187 consumers in Riyadh. Survey of consumers was undertaken during six weeks beginning from 23rd December 2007.

Personal interview survey of 187 consumers, who seek advice of a random sample of 25 community pharmacies (chain and independent) in Riyadh city, was obtained through a 4 h visit made to each pharmacy over a period of six weeks. During these visits, questionnaires were filled by a pharmacy student of all consumers who requested advice from the pharmacists. Of importance, the nature and purpose of the study were discussed with each consumer and assurance of confidentiality and anonymity were made. The interview questionnaire was presented and structured consisting of open and closed questions. Customers were asked to explain the reason (s) that made them decide to come to the pharmacy for advice, throughout open ended questions. Thereafter, they were asked to state which of those was most important. Similarly, customers were asked about the most important reason (s) for choosing a particular pharmacy. Respondents were asked to indicate the frequency and the range of health areas for which they had previously sought advice. Health topics about which consumers said they would like to seek advice from the pharmacist were also stated and recorded. The attitude of clients to six items (short distance from home, good

range of products, efficient services, attractive appearance, convenient working hours, acquaintance with the staff) regarding their views towards pharmacists and their assistants were also addressed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 152 of 187 respondents completed the questionnaire giving a response rate of 81.28%. All the interviewed respondents were males, since they approximately comprised over 90% of customers due to social consideration in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The results showed that 68% of the respondents were Saudi and 92% were residents in Riyadh city. In response to reasons for coming to a particular pharmacy, 32.5% of respondents claimed that they felt that their complaints were not serious enough to warrant seeking medical advice. Whereas, 28.7% said that it was more convenient to see the pharmacists. Furthermore, 18.3% rated that the pharmacist's appropriate understanding is the only reason why they come to visit the pharmacy. Moreover, 6 and 14.5% of the respondents either make non-specific comments or stated that they have no time to visit the clinic, respectively (Table 1).

Respondents were also asked to indicate how many times per year they have requested a pharmacist's advice. A total of 68% of respondents have sought advice from pharmacist, at least once per year. For all respondents the results reflect an annual average of about two requests for advice or information per respondent per year (Table 2).

Table 3 shows the range of health areas and other types of advice for which respondents were requested. Fifty percent asked for advice about OTC medications and 39% sought prescription advice. Minor health problems, first aid information and baby's needs were sought by 28, 21 and 19% of respondents, respectively, whereas, 6% sought information about general health matters and other topics.

Table 1: Reasons for pharmacist's advice

Reasons for visits	Percent responses (n = 152)
Convenience of the consumers	28.7
Pharmacist has appropriate knowledge of medicines	18.3
Minor ailment, not necessary to go to clinic	32.5
Don't have time to go to clinic	14.5
Non-specific	6.0

Table 2: Frequency of advice sought from the pharmacist

Frequency of advice (times per year)	Percent responses (n = 152)
0	32
1-3	30
4-7	25
8 and >8	13

When the respondents were asked about the most important reasons for choosing a particular pharmacy, 65% indicated that they have chosen the nearest location from their home and 34% attributed the reasons to the good range of products, the pharmacy contains and excellent services provided by the pharmacist. Whereas, 29% stated that it was the convenient working hours of the pharmacy that was considered in choosing the pharmacy. On the other hand, the efficiency of services (22%), attractive appearance of the pharmacy (14%) and knowledge of the staff (10%) were among factors clients considered as important in choosing a particular pharmacy (Table 4).

In other questions, clients were asked to state the important kinds of goods and services that should be available in all pharmacies (Table 5).

Table 3: Type of advice requested from the pharmacists

Type of advice	Percent response* (n = 152)
OTC medication	50
Prescription medication	39
Minor health problems	28
First aid information	21
Baby needs	19
General health information	6
Doctor referrals and information	4
Hair care products	3

*Multiple answers means that the percentages sum to be more than 100%

Table 4: Reasons to choose a particular pharmacy

Reasons to select a specific pharmacy	Percent response* (n = 152)
Short distance from home	65
Good range of products/services	34
Efficient services	22
Attractive appearance	14
Convenient working hours	29
Acquaintance with the staff	10

*Multiple answers means that the percentages sum to be more than 100%

Table 5: Products and services to be available in all pharmacies

Comment	Percent response* (n = 152)
Display of address and telephone number of different clinics and hospitals	32
Availability of all prescribed medicines	75
Waiting seats	43
Dietary supplements and advice	27
Baby care items	25
Diagnostic services	14
Others	1

*Multiple answers means that the percentages sum to be more than 100%

Table 6: Desiring qualities of a pharmacist

Comment	Percent response* (n = 152)
Willing to offer advice	62
Knowledge/competence of the pharmacist	31
Quick service	29
Honesty	21
Friendliness	14
Clear hand writing	10
Communication skill in native language	20

*Multiple answers means that the percentages sum to be more than 100%

With regards to questions on personal qualities in the pharmacists needed by the clients, 62% stated that the most important qualities demanded are the willingness to provide both verbal and written advice, while 29% said that it was the quicker services which most frequently desired. On the other hand, 31% stated that competence and more knowledge about medicines are qualities they highly sought. Similarly, honesty, speaking mother language (Arabic), friendliness and clear hand-writing were among the most important qualities appreciated by 21, 20, 14 and 10% of the respondents, respectively (Table 6).

The attitudes of the customers to a list of six items regarding their views towards pharmacists were shown in Table 7. The results showed that the overall trend in these stated items is towards uncertainty, rating 3-4 scores on 5-point scale. Except for the item Pharmacist is impersonal which show a low score of 2.29%. Moreover, about 72% of respondents were either agreed or strongly agreed that pharmacists are qualified as a health professional, 63.82% agreed or strongly agreed that pharmacist assistant do not know enough about health care to give an advice. However, 50% of the respondents agree or strongly agree that pharmacists are the primary source of medication information. Almost, 42% agreed that pharmacists should stock supermarket items and nearly 39% agree or strongly agree that pharmacists are not qualified to discuss with customers their health complaints. In contrast, 71.71% disagree or strongly disagree that pharmacists are impersonal.

The present study highlights a variety of factors that motivates community pharmacy patronage. Regardless the reasons concerning OTC and prescription dispensing, some of the customers (28.7%) come to the pharmacy on their convenience. Others (65 and 29%) consider convenience of location and working hours of the pharmacy as the important factors influencing their decision to seek pharmacist's advice, respectively. Yet, a substantial number of clients are still stimulated by pharmacy design and good range of mix product and services provided by the pharmacy as well. Furthermore, with regards to clients' view toward the pharmacist, the study revealed a high level of support for the advisory and health related role of the pharmacist. The result confirms the findings of earlier surveys (Gilbert, 1998; Oparah and Kikanme, 2006; Anderson, 2007; Sakurai *et al.*, 2007). This in fact shows that clients do perceive the pharmacist as an important source of advice for patient-oriented services rather than merely a medical supplier.

It is interesting to note that most of the clients emphasize on the advisory role of the pharmacist and his clinical knowledge rather than personal aspects (honesty,

Table 7: Consumer views regarding pharmacists

Views of consumers about pharmacist	Strongly agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Agree/ Strongly agree	Disagree/ Strongly disagree
Pharmacists are qualified health professionals	34	76	19	13	10	72.37	15.13
Pharmacists should stock supermarket items	21	44	37	32	18	42.76	32.89
Pharmacists are primary source of information on medication	32	81	22	12	5	50.00	11.78
Pharmacists are non-qualified to tell people their medical problem	21	39	57	23	12	39.47	23.03
Pharmacists are impersonal	8	11	34	53	56	12.50	71.71
Pharmacy assistants are not competent about health care to advice the patient	29	68	20	20	15	63.82	23.03

*Multiple answers means that the percentages sum to be more than 100%

friendliness and other characters) as the favorite quality of a pharmacist. This result is consistent with other reported studies which showed that low professional image of pharmacists is due to their lack of necessary clinical knowledge (Lustig and Zusman, 1994). This is overwhelming support, although indicates that clients may expect a satisfactory standard of professional competence and assume a safe and appropriate advisory services based on pharmacist's clinical knowledge. Attention must be paid to the importance of these personal aspects, if the pharmacist wishes to meet all customer needs. Likewise, the accepted dual professional commercial role of the pharmacist by clients which was reflected in many of types of advice and services requested, dictates the need for developing extra counseling skills by the pharmacist, in order to deal with topics such as baby's cares and other minor health problems (Villako and Raal, 2007).

The present study has also highlighted some of the aspects of pharmacy important services to patient/clients and considered fundamentally to the development of strategies to expand and promote community pharmacy services in Saudi Arabia. In conclusion, the result of the study showed a high level of public support for the advisory role of the pharmacist. To be effective in this role, the pharmacist needs to have good professional training and improves his communication skills (Tanaka *et al.*, 2008) by devoting more of his time to challenging and stimulating tasks such as counseling patient/clients on drugs and other health related matters (McGivney *et al.*, 2003). Communicating with patients also creates patient loyalty and improves the pharmacist's professional image. Furthermore, a variety of other factors that motivates pharmacy visits were also determined. Building strategies based on these findings will greatly help in maintaining regular customers and attract impulse and infrequent clients. Finally, it is not possible to conclude from the present study the reasons that inhibit clients from seeking the pharmacist advice. Possibly the lack of privacy and associated supermarket style marketing may have great influence in deterring those potential advice-seekers (Lindblad *et al.*, 2006). Thus, the

problem of providing a suitable environment for privacy must be addressed, if the pharmacist wishes to attract social advisory seekers.

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