Identifying Barriers to Dispensing Non-Prescription Syringes: A Survey of Community Pharmacists in North Carolina

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Approximately 56,000 individuals are infected with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) each year and injection drug users represent 12% of new HIV infections. In a recent HIV outbreak in Scott County, Indiana of February 2015, the majority of those newly diagnosed cases were due to sharing syringes while injecting oxymorphone. Community pharmacists are essential to increasing nonprescription syringe access to reduce bloodborne pathogen infections; however, North Carolina pharmacists have the choice to deny non-prescription syringes.

This study aims to (1) identify barriers NC community pharmacists have to dispensing non-prescription syringes and (2) identify potential solutions to overcome these barriers.

This will be a cross-sectional study, conducted online via Qualtrics. Using the Board of Pharmacy’s database, a link to a 15-item survey will be e-mailed to all actively-licensed, community pharmacists in NC. Survey items include assessment of participant’s personal/religious beliefs, interpretation of their pharmacy company policy, and interpretation of the federal/state regulations towards the nonprescription syringe sales. Other items include the participant’s perception of Needle Exchange Programs and factors influencing the decision for a sale transaction. The authors have partnered with the Western NC AIDS Project and the NC Harm Reduction Coalition, for assistance in the formulation of survey questions.

The questionnaire was pilot-tested among a convenience sample of students/pharmacists for feedback on validity and question structure. The study was approved by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s Institutional Review Board. Completion of the survey was voluntary and confidential, and was open for 30 days with a reminder sent on day 15. Participants entered into a drawing to receive one of 10 $25 gift cards as incentive for survey completion.
The survey had been distributed through the NC Board of Pharmacy to 5,598 e-mail addresses and successfully reached 5,589 e-mail addresses. 1,067 participants answered the first question, but only 904 participants had completed the survey.

Of the 1,067 participants that answered the question, “as a pharmacist, do you sell non-prescription syringes?” 30% of participants always, 64% sometimes, and 8% never sell non-prescription syringes. 83% of participants who always sell non-prescription syringes cite public health and HIV/hepatitis C virus (HCV) prevention as their reason to why they always sell. Of the participants that sometimes sell, the top characteristic that influences their decision is the customer’s sobriety. 70% of participants that choose to never sell non-prescription syringes cite personal beliefs as their reason for never selling.

Regardless of how the participant answered the first question, all participants were asked to answer 3 questions regarding Needle Exchange Programs (NEPs). 89% support the legalization of NEPs, 87% would refer their customer to a NEP (if available), and 76% would support efforts to updating NC law to clearly state the legalization of retail pharmacies selling non-prescription syringes.

Community pharmacists recognize their potential impact for public health and in prevention of HIV/HCV; however, barriers to selling non-prescription syringes include personal beliefs, lack of clarity from federal/state regulations, and misperceptions of the customer. Legislative update in pharmacy practice is needed, in addition to legalization of NEPs.