Should pharmacists have prescribing rights?

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The US Food and Drug Administration (US FDA) approves new drugs either as prescription or non-prescription. A drug must be dispensed by prescription if, "because of its toxicity or other potential for harmful effect, or the method of its use, or the collateral measures necessary to its use, [it] is not safe for use except under the supervision of a practitioner licensed by law to administer such drug. Non-prescription drugs can be purchased by consumers without a prescription.[1]

In February 2012, the FDA proposed to allow some drugs that currently require a prescription to be made available over the counter (OTC) under certain conditions, such as after a consultation with a pharmacist.[1] Some of the prescription drugs, such as emergency asthma medications could be made available without a prescription, under "conditions of safe use." Some consumers defer necessary medical care due to cost and time restraint. FDA is of view to make certain prescription medications available without prescription.

We would like to make certain comments on the pharmacy practice in the Indian context. While pharmacists are important members of the patient care team, they do not have the statutory authority to prescribe drugs. Prescription writing involves consideration for drug pharmacology, age, weight, co-existing diseases, etc. This skill can only be developed by years of medical practice and not by short courses in prescription writing. The dispensing process is an integral part of the quality use of medicines and together with adequate patient instructions forms the main role of a pharmacist. This allows safe provision of drugs to the general public.

A pharmacist sometimes misinterprets the reason (pathology/disease) for what a drug has been prescribed and communicate wrong information to the patient. This leads to confusion between patient and the treating doctor; sometimes result in refusal/discontinuation of the treatment. Besides this, the pharmacists prescribe antibiotics also for patients; sometimes half the course if the patients cannot afford the entire course. Hazards of taking an incomplete course are known to all.

With this kind of scenario in India, we do not know how far the FDA proposal can be implemented in India. Additionally there is a chance of misusing this regulation to prescribe all types of drugs. If at all pharmacists are allowed to prescribe; there has to be a registry under an appropriate act to make them eligible to prescribe drugs; also they should have sufficient information to make decisions on safe and effective drug therapy.

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