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## COMMENTARIES

### Public Opinion On Dispensing Doctors In Malaysia

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#### Introduction

The pharmacy profession has undergone tremendous changes especially in the last four decades. Within this context, the current pharmacy practice is becoming more patient-oriented and has opened an avenue for pharmacists to engage in a more prominent role as healthcare providers in the healthcare system [1]. The modern pharmacists consider pharmaceutical care as the focus of their practice [2]. Moreover, throughout the period from the ancient apothecary system to the modern era of pharmaceutical care, dispensing was considered as the core responsibility of a pharmacist [3]. This enabled the pharmacists to establish direct contact with patients and thus, to provide valuable patient care services that included patient counseling, adverse drug reaction (ADR) monitoring and reporting, among others.

Malaysia is a developing country in South East Asia, which still follows a traditional 'dispensing doctors' system. Doctors in Malaysia still dispense medications as a part of their professional practice. There is still

no separation of functions related to drug dispensing and prescribing between doctors' clinics and pharmacies. Registered pharmacists are not the only professionals with the legal right and responsibility of dispensing medications.

#### Materials and Methods

The perception of the general public towards this practice in Malaysia is not known. Hence, we conducted a survey with the primary objective of studying the perception of the general public towards the dispensing doctors' practice. This study was a cross-sectional survey using a questionnaire. The survey instrument consisted of three parts: the demographic profile of the respondents, three items to explore the perception towards dispensing separation and 19 items related to the public's perception about dispensing doctors in Malaysia. The survey was carried out from August 4 to August 15, 2008 in the State of Penang.

#### Results

Of the 1000 respondents who participated in the study, 578 (57.8%) were male. Three hundred and six (30.6%) of the respondents were aged less than 20 years, 464 (46.4%) were in the age group 20-29, 187 (18.7%) were in the age group of 30-39 years, 38 (3.8%) were in the age group of 40-49 years, and 5 (0.5%) were more than 49 years old. Of the total respondents, 37 (3.7%) had primary education, 365 (36.5%) had secondary education and the remaining 598 (59.8%) had a tertiary-level education. Furthermore, 374 (37.4%) of the respondents had visited at least one general practitioner (GP) in the past 2 months and 339 (33.9%) had visited a community

pharmacist at least once in order to get some health-related advice or to purchase medicines, health devices or health supplements.

Only 268 (26.8%) of the respondents had answered 'yes' to the question 'do you agree with the implementation of dispensing separation in Penang?', while the remaining 732 (73.2%) of them answered 'no'. Interestingly, 616 respondents (61.6%) had the willingness to get medications prescribed by their doctor, from a pharmacy. Similarly, 54.3% of the respondents thought that a pharmacist is more reliable than a doctor in explaining the uses and side effects of medicines and drugs.

The detailed responses of the public towards dispensing doctors are listed in [Table/Fig 1].

Overall, it was seen that the public liked the concept of 'dispensing doctors' in Malaysia. This might be because of their convenience.

Note: SA = strongly agree; A G= agree; DS = disagree; and SD=strongly disagree.

**Discussion**

Considering the importance of the pharmacist's role in the healthcare system, few countries in this region such as Korea [4] and Taiwan [5] have made attempts to separate dispensing from prescribing. The act of dispensing by doctors provides easy access to medicines and convenience to the patients. However, in case of minor and self-limiting ailments, it is bothersome for the patients to pay the consultation charges to the doctors, as well as pay for medications. A study reported that the dispensing doctors make a huge markup in the prices of medicines (upto 50% - 76%) for innovator brands and 316% for generics [6].

Currently, hot debates are going on in Malaysia between the government, pharmacists and doctors regarding dispensing doctors and the implementation of dispensing separation [7],[8]. Unfortunately, doctors seem reluctant to loose this right of 'dispensing'. The National Medicines Policy of Malaysia states that medical and dental practitioners are allowed to dispense medications, but to improve the quality of the use of medicines in the future, the prescribing and dispensing must be separated. It also mentions that the pharmacists have a central role in dispensing medications and counseling patients on their use [9].

**Conclusion**

In the era of 'responsible self medication' by pharmacists [10], this can be a blow to the patients. In conclusion, we do not know whether this is a failure of the professional pharmacy organizations or not, but it is definitely a failure for the practicing pharmacists.

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(Table/Fig 1) The responses of the public towards dispensing doctors in Penang, Malaysia

Survey question/ statement	Responses					Chi-square test exact p-values				
	SD (n) (%)	DS (n) (%)	AG (n) (%)	SA (n) (%)	M/F	Ethnicity	Age	Education	Income	
Since two professionals will look at medicines given to you, fewer mistakes will occur.	391 (39.1)	544 (54.4)	47 (4.7)	18 (1.8)	04	058	054	< .001	< .001	
Difficult to find a pharmacist at night.	251 (25.1)	435 (43.5)	201 (20.1)	113 (11.3)	10	.214	.645	< .001	< .001	
Pharmacist will provide a better advice on the use of your medicine than staff in doctor's clinic.	234 (23.4)	458 (45.8)	255 (25.5)	53 (5.3)	16	.415	.077	< .001	< .001	
Medicines prescribed by doctor may NOT be available in pharmacy.	224 (22.4)	465 (46.5)	232 (23.2)	79 (7.9)	47	.305	.022	< .001	< .001	
Doctors will be more careful with giving medicine as pharmacist will check medicine given.	214 (21.4)	448 (44.8)	244 (24.4)	94 (9.4)	84	.287	.989	.416	< .001	
More problems will occur as I do not trust community pharmacist.	174 (17.4)	438 (43.8)	250 (25.0)	138 (13.8)	11	.469	.944	.117	< .001	
Health cost for the country will decrease as doctors will not give unnecessary medicines.	210 (21.0)	396 (39.6)	328 (32.8)	72 (7.2)	07	.317	.675	.001	< .001	
Getting medicines from community pharmacists after being diagnosed by a general practitioner will enhance patient care.	185 (18.5)	392 (39.2)	337 (33.7)	86 (8.6)	04	.249	.561	.076	< .001	
I prefer to get my medicines from the pharmacists rather than the doctor rezing me.	185 (18.5)	425 (42.5)	264 (26.4)	126 (12.6)	83	.629	.558	< .001	< .001	
I feel that it will be beneficial for patients if their medication dispensed by pharmacists rather than clinic assistant.	181 (18.1)	413 (41.3)	274 (27.4)	132 (13.2)	33	.127	.777	< .001	< .001	
In my opinion, pharmacists are in better position to dispense medication rather than a general practitioner.	185 (18.5)	384 (38.4)	332 (33.2)	99 (9.9)	76	.643	.636	< .001	< .001	
I will support the future implementation of dispensing separation in Malaysia.	85 (8.5)	374 (37.4)	344 (34.4)	197 (19.7)	10	.476	.611	< .001	< .001	
I think that the cost of medication dispensed by private medical practitioners is costly.	132 (13.2)	407 (40.7)	304 (30.4)	157 (15.7)	01	.124	.052	< .001	< .001	
I think we can reduce the cost of medication by introducing dispensing separation.	110 (11.0)	320 (32.0)	392 (39.2)	176 (17.6)	42	.653	.166	< .001	< .001	
I think that pharmacists are charging less compared to doctors for medicines.	161 (16.1)	324 (32.4)	384 (38.4)	131 (13.1)	58	.491	.691	.003	< .001	
I prefer to get my medication supply from my general practitioner.	104 (10.4)	414 (41.4)	388 (38.8)	94 (9.4)	2	.561	.484	.858	< .001	
Medication errors can be minimized if medication can be dispensed by a pharmacist.	133 (13.3)	418 (41.8)	363 (36.3)	86 (8.6)	12	.019	.892	< .001	< .001	
If the location between a general practitioner clinic and a pharmacy is within the walking distance from the pharmacy, I will definitely get my medicine from my pharmacist.	238 (23.8)	410 (41.0)	264 (26.4)	88 (8.8)	0	.933	.147	.001	< .001	
The present system of dispensing medication is so good, therefore don't think that dispensing separation is necessary.	227 (22.7)	336 (33.6)	342 (34.2)	95 (9.5)	19	.003	.491	.001	< .001	

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