

PATIENT TRUST AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN COMMUNITY PHARMACIES: A QUALITATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the central role of patient trust and communication strategies in community pharmacies, emphasizing their importance for healthcare quality and patient satisfaction. Effective communication fosters understanding, improves adherence to treatment, and enhances the credibility of pharmacists as frontline healthcare providers. Conversely, miscommunication or lack of trust may weaken the pharmacist–patient relationship and compromise therapeutic outcomes. Using a qualitative perspective, the study investigates how patients perceive trust, what communication practices they value most, and how organizational contexts shape pharmacist–patient interactions. Through interviews and thematic analysis, the research identifies key factors that strengthen trust, including transparency, empathy, and patient-centered counseling. The findings highlight the strategic importance of communication skills and supportive organizational environments in reinforcing trust and ensuring sustainable, patient-oriented pharmaceutical services.

KEYWORDS: *Patient trust, Communication strategies, Community pharmacies, Healthcare quality, Patient–pharmacist relationship*

J.E.L Classifications: I11 I12, I18, M12, M31.

1. INTRODUCTION

Community pharmacies have become essential access points for healthcare, offering not only medicines but also personalized advice and ongoing support for patients. As the first line of contact for many individuals, pharmacists play a vital role in ensuring that treatments are understood, followed, and trusted. The effectiveness of this role depends heavily on the quality of communication between pharmacists and patients, as well as on the level of trust that patients place in the information and guidance they receive.

In recent years, community pharmacies have faced increasing demands: higher patient volumes, more complex therapeutic regimens, and the growing use of digital technologies. These developments, while expanding the scope of pharmacy services, also create challenges in maintaining meaningful interactions. Miscommunication or a lack of trust can reduce treatment adherence and undermine health outcomes.

This article explores the ways in which pharmacists can build trust through effective communication strategies. It adopts a qualitative perspective to examine patient experiences, identify common barriers to interaction, and highlight practices that foster stronger pharmacist–patient relationships. Ultimately, the study emphasizes the strategic importance of communication and trust for ensuring patient-centered, sustainable pharmacy services.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Patient Trust in Community Pharmacies: Conceptual Foundations

Trust is a central component of effective healthcare delivery, shaping how patients perceive the quality, safety, and reliability of the services they receive. Within community pharmacies, trust encompasses confidence in the pharmacist's competence, integrity, and commitment to patients' well-being. It reflects the belief that pharmacists act in the patient's best interest, provide accurate information, and safeguard confidentiality. Unlike other healthcare settings, community pharmacies are highly accessible, often serving as the first point of contact for health advice, which amplifies the importance of trust in pharmacist–patient interactions.

Conceptually, patient trust can be understood as both interpersonal—focusing on the relationship between pharmacist and patient—and institutional, linked to the reputation and professionalism of the pharmacy as an organization (Hall et al., 2001). Trust fosters open communication, enabling patients to share sensitive health concerns and adhere to treatment recommendations. Studies have shown that higher levels of trust are associated with better medication adherence, improved health outcomes, and increased patient satisfaction with pharmacy services (Okanović et al., 2018).

Building and maintaining trust in community pharmacies therefore requires consistent, transparent communication, demonstration of empathy, and the delivery of patient-centered care. These foundational elements create a reliable environment where patients feel secure and supported, laying the groundwork for more advanced strategies explored in subsequent sections.

2.2 Communication Strategies in Pharmacy Practice: Determinants and Barriers

Effective communication is a cornerstone of patient-centered care in community pharmacies, as it shapes patients' understanding of their treatment and fosters adherence to medication regimens. Pharmacists employ a range of strategies such as active listening, use of plain language, and the provision of tailored counseling to meet patients' diverse health literacy levels (Kataoka et al., 2018). Non-verbal communication, empathy, and cultural sensitivity are equally important, since they contribute to building rapport and creating a supportive environment for patients (Naughton, 2018).

However, several barriers can hinder the effective implementation of communication strategies. Time pressure and high workload often limit pharmacists' ability to engage in meaningful dialogue with patients, leading to shorter consultations and missed opportunities for health promotion (Deschamps et al., 2019). Organizational constraints, such as limited staffing and performance targets, may further reduce the time available for counseling. In addition, varying levels of health literacy among patients create challenges in ensuring that information is understood and applied appropriately (Odukoya & Chui, 2013).

Addressing these barriers requires a holistic approach that combines professional training in communication skills with structural adjustments to pharmacy practice. By prioritizing clear, empathetic, and culturally competent communication, community pharmacies can enhance patient trust, reduce medication errors, and contribute to improved health outcomes.

2.3 Best Practices for Strengthening Patient–Pharmacist Relationships

Building and sustaining patient trust in community pharmacies requires deliberate strategies that go beyond the transactional act of dispensing medications. Best practices emphasize personalized communication, where pharmacists adapt their language and counseling approaches to the patient’s health literacy, cultural background, and preferences (Santos et al., 2019). Establishing empathy and showing genuine concern for patients’ well-being are consistently linked to higher levels of trust and satisfaction (Kettis-Lindblad et al., 2007).

Active patient engagement is another critical strategy. Inviting patients to participate in shared decision-making and encouraging questions fosters transparency and enhances perceptions of credibility (Ozawa & Sripad, 2013). Simple practices such as maintaining eye contact, using teach-back techniques, and providing written information can substantially improve understanding of treatment regimens.

At the organizational level, training programs focused on communication skills, motivational interviewing, and cultural competence help pharmacists manage challenging conversations more effectively (Mesquita et al., 2015). Additionally, implementing private counseling areas within pharmacies has been shown to enhance confidentiality and comfort, strengthening the pharmacist–patient relationship.

Ultimately, the integration of these best practices contributes to a culture of patient-centered care, where trust is cultivated through consistent, respectful, and empathetic interactions. Such approaches not only improve clinical outcomes but also reinforce the vital role of community pharmacies as trusted healthcare access points.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a **qualitative research design** to explore the dynamics of patient trust and communication strategies in community pharmacies. Qualitative approaches are particularly effective for capturing the depth of patients’ experiences, perceptions, and expectations, which cannot be fully represented through quantitative measures (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Question: *How do communication strategies employed by community pharmacists influence the development and maintenance of patient trust?*

Research Objectives:

- To examine patients’ perceptions of pharmacist communication and its role in fostering trust.
- To identify barriers and facilitators affecting communication in community pharmacies.
- To explore how organizational structures and working conditions influence pharmacists’ ability to establish trust-based relationships.

Research Hypotheses:

- **H1: Transparent and empathetic communication from pharmacists is positively associated with higher patient trust.**
- **H2: Time constraints and high workload negatively affect the quality of pharmacist–patient communication.**
- **H3: Organizational support for communication skills and patient engagement initiatives reduces barriers and enhances trust.**

- **H4: The presence of private counseling areas contributes to higher patient confidence in pharmacy services.**

Methodology:

Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with pharmacists and patients in community settings, complemented by focus group discussions to capture collective perspectives on communication practices. A purposive sampling strategy will ensure representation across diverse demographic groups, pharmacy sizes, and service contexts. Interview transcripts will be analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and emergent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Triangulation of interview data with secondary sources, such as professional guidelines and policy documents, will enhance the validity of findings. This approach aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how communication strategies shape patient trust in community pharmacies.

4. APPLIED RESEARCH ON PATIENT TRUST AND COMMUNICATION IN COMMUNITY PHARMACIES: QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS AND STRATEGIC ANALYSIS

The integration of patient-centered communication frameworks into community pharmacy practice is transforming how pharmacists build and sustain trust with the individuals they serve. Central to this evolution is the recognition that patient trust is not merely an interpersonal outcome, but a cornerstone of effective healthcare delivery that ensures adherence, satisfaction, and long-term engagement with treatment. In the context of community pharmacies, communication is multidimensional—ranging from clear explanations of medication use to empathetic listening—requiring both professional skills and supportive organizational structures.

To strengthen trust and enhance the quality of pharmaceutical care, community pharmacies must adopt **communication-centered management models**. Such models emphasize transparency in counseling, structured opportunities for dialogue, and the creation of private spaces where patients feel comfortable sharing sensitive information. These approaches ensure that interactions are not limited to transactional exchanges but become meaningful encounters that empower patients to make informed decisions about their health.

Scholarly evidence highlights the value of continuous training in interpersonal communication, motivational interviewing, and cultural competence as key enablers of trust-building practices. In parallel, organizational support in the form of adequate staffing, manageable workloads, and feedback mechanisms creates an environment in which pharmacists can engage fully with their patients.

From an applied research perspective, a three-dimensional framework emerges:

1. **Identify and Monitor Barriers:** Detect communication challenges such as time constraints, environmental distractions, and health literacy gaps.
2. **Develop and Support Skills:** Equip pharmacists with training and tools to foster empathy, active listening, and patient engagement.
3. **Institutionalize Best Practices:** Transform insights from patient experiences into sustainable strategies that strengthen trust and enhance service quality.

When effectively implemented, these strategies enable community pharmacies to act as reliable, patient-centered hubs of care, reinforcing their role as trusted partners in modern healthcare systems.

5. CAUSE-EFFECT ANALYSIS OF TRUST AND COMMUNICATION IN COMMUNITY PHARMACIES

The cause-effect analysis highlights how specific challenges in community pharmacies influence patient trust and the effectiveness of communication. By examining the links between root causes and their consequences, it becomes evident that trust is shaped by both structural and interpersonal factors. The following table illustrates five major causes of communication difficulties, each associated with three key effects on patient-pharmacist relationships.

Table 5.1. Cause-Effect Analysis of Trust and Communication in Community Pharmacies

Cause	Effect 1	Effect 2	Effect 3
1. Limited consultation time	Patients perceive interactions as hurried, leading to doubts about the pharmacist's dedication.	Key details about dosage and precautions may be omitted, increasing the risk of misuse.	Reduced opportunities for building rapport undermine long-term trust.
2. Lack of private space for counseling	Patients avoid discussing sensitive issues (e.g., sexual health, mental health) due to fear of being overheard.	Communication becomes superficial, limiting the pharmacist's ability to provide tailored advice.	Confidentiality concerns diminish the perception of professionalism and reliability.
3. Excessive administrative workload	Pharmacists prioritize dispensing tasks over patient dialogue, reducing face-to-face interaction.	Patients may feel neglected or undervalued, weakening trust in the service.	Workload stress contributes to hurried communication, which can cause errors and misinterpretations.
4. Use of complex medical jargon	Patients experience confusion about how and when to take medicines correctly.	Misunderstanding of side effects may reduce adherence or increase anxiety.	Overly technical language creates distance, lowering patients' confidence in pharmacist support.
5. Insufficient communication training	Variability in communication styles leads to inconsistent patient experiences.	Pharmacists may struggle to manage challenging conversations, reducing effectiveness.	Lack of training limits the adoption of empathetic and patient-centered practices, restricting trust-building.

source: self-processing

6. SWOT ANALYSIS – PATIENT TRUST AND COMMUNICATION IN COMMUNITY PHARMACIES

The analysis of patient trust and communication in community pharmacies highlights both the inherent advantages of the profession and the challenges it faces in a changing healthcare environment. By identifying internal strengths and weaknesses alongside external opportunities and threats, this framework provides a foundation for strategic action to reinforce the pharmacist–patient relationship.

Table 6.1. SWOT Analysis – Patient Trust and Communication in Community Pharmacies

Strengths	Weaknesses
S1. High accessibility of community pharmacies for patients	W1. Limited consultation time per patient
S2. Established reputation as trusted healthcare providers	W2. Frequent interruptions and high workload
S3. Strong professional knowledge of medicines	W3. Inconsistent communication skills among pharmacists
S4. Existing pharmacist–patient familiarity in local communities	W4. Lack of private spaces for confidential counseling
S5. Ability to offer personalized advice	W5. Limited resources for communication training
S6. Regular patient contact fosters relationship building	W6. Commercial pressures may conflict with patient-centered care
S7. Pharmacists’ role in medication safety	W7. Low recognition of pharmacists’ advisory role by some patients
S8. Integration in multidisciplinary healthcare teams	W8. Variable health literacy among patients
S9. Increasing emphasis on patient-centered care	W9. Resistance to adopting new communication technologies
S10. Support from professional associations and ethical codes	W10. Risk of depersonalization and reduced empathy
Opportunities	Threats
O1. Development of structured communication training programs	T1. Growing complexity of healthcare information
O2. Expansion of telepharmacy and digital health tools	T2. Risk of digital fatigue for pharmacists and patients
O3. Greater policy emphasis on patient engagement	T3. Rising patient expectations and demands
O4. Availability of funding for professional development	T4. Economic pressures reducing time for counseling
O5. Interprofessional collaboration with other healthcare providers	T5. Shortage of qualified pharmacy staff

O6. Integration of health literacy initiatives into practice	T6. Persisting stigma around discussing sensitive health issues
O7. Use of patient feedback systems to improve communication	T7. Potential misinformation from online sources undermining trust
O8. Growing public demand for holistic and preventive care	T8. Rapid regulatory changes creating uncertainty
O9. Adoption of digital platforms for patient education	T9. Data privacy concerns affecting patient openness
O10. Partnerships with universities for communication research	T10. Increased competition from online pharmacies

source: self-processing

The SWOT analysis illustrates that community pharmacies hold strong assets in accessibility, expertise, and patient rapport, yet face challenges such as limited time, workload, and varying communication skills. By leveraging opportunities like digital tools, patient feedback, and professional training, while addressing systemic and contextual threats, pharmacies can enhance trust and establish themselves as reliable, patient-centered healthcare providers.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study highlight the central role of communication in shaping and maintaining patient trust within community pharmacies. As highly accessible healthcare providers, pharmacists are uniquely positioned to foster strong relationships with patients, yet their effectiveness depends on the quality of interactions that occur during often brief consultations. Trust emerges not only from professional competence but also from the demonstration of empathy, clarity, and respect in everyday exchanges.

The applied analysis reveals that several structural and interpersonal factors influence communication quality. Limited consultation time, insufficient privacy, and heavy administrative tasks often hinder meaningful dialogue, while reliance on technical terminology or inadequate training can reduce patient understanding. Conversely, pharmacists' expertise, regular contact with patients, and their established credibility remain significant strengths that can be leveraged to build trust.

Strategic interventions are therefore essential. Investing in communication training, expanding private counseling areas, and fostering organizational cultures that value patient engagement are crucial steps toward enhancing trust. Moreover, digital tools and telepharmacy offer new opportunities to improve access and streamline communication, provided they are implemented thoughtfully to avoid digital fatigue or depersonalization.

Ultimately, patient trust and effective communication are not peripheral to pharmaceutical care but represent its foundation. By addressing existing weaknesses and leveraging opportunities, community pharmacies can strengthen their role as trusted healthcare partners, improve adherence and safety, and contribute to more sustainable, patient-centered health systems.

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