

Jessica Vargas, PharmD candidate; Christina Dang, PharmD candidate;
Vaiyapuri Subramaniam, PharmD, MS, FCP

Public health approaches in ethnically diverse populations

As America's diverse population continues to grow, disparities in healthcare delivery have become more prevalent. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that the U.S. population will increase by 50%, from 263 million in 1995 to 394 million in 2050, with racial and ethnic minority populations accounting for nearly 90% of the increase in the overall U.S. population.¹ This shift in demographics makes these disparities a pressing matter of public health. Studies show that when it comes to healthcare benchmarks, many racial and ethnically diverse populations are at a disadvantage.

Popular perception holds pharmacists among the most accessible and trustworthy of healthcare providers. In that role, they can help address the inequalities currently existing in healthcare. Some of the most prominent issues facing patients include low health-literacy levels, socioeconomic status, and cultural barriers that can affect their access to healthcare.

Among the public health tasks pharmacists can assume are improvement of the wellbeing of the population and emphasis on the priority of a community's health-related needs.² Pharmacists can play a key role in decreasing disparities by increasing patient health education, promoting cultural competency in healthcare professionals, and emphasizing disease prevention in disadvantaged groups.

Health literacy

Health literacy is the ability to read, understand, interpret, and act on health information.³ The prevalence of inadequate health literacy is high in elderly, low-income, and minority patients, with rates of more than 50% in public hospitals and clinics, and more than 33% among Medicare recipients.⁴

Low levels of health literacy among patients reflect a lack of knowledge and familiarity with medical interventions that may affect their ability to manage their health. Studies show that minority



patients are less informed about their care than are other groups of patients and that this difference affects decision-making.⁵

Among healthcare professionals with whom patients interact, pharmacists are most accessible and are qualified to assess health literacy and provide appropriate patient education.⁶

By paying attention to the literacy level, language, and cultural characteristics of their patients, pharmacists are in a position to use information tools to help patients become more active participants in their own healthcare.

Tools to improve health literacy include

oral and written methods, as well as visual media such as charts, calendars, picture books, and videotapes, which have been shown effective in increasing patients' ability to recall medical information.⁴

Cultural barriers

Some of the most widely overlooked healthcare disparities lie within cultural barriers. Differences in culture, language, and literacy between providers and patients can lead to ineffective communication about symptoms, medications, and supplements.⁷

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Pharmacists' public health roles in ethnically diverse populations

Health literacy	Socioeconomic status	Cultural competency
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recognize patients' health literacy level 2. Provide appropriate patient-education informational tools <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Charts • Calendars • Picture books • Videos 3. Encourage patient participation 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Disease prevention <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smoking cessation • Immunizations • Health screenings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blood pressure • Glucose 2. Medication management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chronic disease management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MTM • Medication adherence 3. Patient education <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote healthy diet and exercise 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide culturally appropriate care, with consideration of values, beliefs, and behaviors 2. Recognize alternative medicine practices when considering drug interactions 3. Use available resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpreters • Community health workers • Traditional healers

Abbreviation: MTM, Medication therapy management

Source: Jessica Vargas, Christina Dang, Vaiyapuri Subramaniam

Examples of cultural barriers include instances in which the healthcare provider may overlook harmful interactions between medications and traditional remedies used by the patient, and circumstances in which the provider is unfamiliar with cultural elements connected with racial or ethnic groups.⁸

These limitations may lead to faulty diagnoses, unnecessary laboratory testing, medication-related errors, decreased adherence to therapy, or missed opportunities for early detection and preventive measures.⁸

Cultural competency is an important quality for pharmacists to recognize and promote.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in order to provide culturally competent care, pharmacists must not only be knowledgeable about cultural differences and their impact on attitudes and behaviors; they must also be sensitive, understanding, nonjudgmental, and respectful.

For example, familiarity with alternative medicine practices is a crucial aspect of screening for drug interactions. Flexibility and skill are also necessary in responding and adapting to different

cultural contexts and circumstances.⁹

When faced with these differences, pharmacists should always use resources such as interpreters, community health workers, and traditional healers when appropriate.

Pharmacists should partner with community groups, governmental agencies, healthcare provider organizations, payers, and others to increase awareness of specific diseases among certain populations.

Socioeconomic status

Another strong source of health disparities within ethnically diverse populations is socioeconomic status relating to income, education, and occupation.¹⁰ Numerous studies show that poverty has a stronger influence on health and utilization of healthcare than does ethnicity.¹⁰

A common related issue is lack of

health insurance, which can lead to undiagnosed disease states, decreased medication adherence, limited access to preventive care, and increased hospitalizations.

Patients who are disadvantaged socioeconomically make up a large proportion of ethnically diverse populations suffering from healthcare disparities. As public health professionals, pharmacists can promote initiatives in underserved populations through disease-prevention programs, medication therapy management, and patient education.

According to Healthy People 2010, pharmacists should be involved in the national goals of reducing the numbers of adults with high total blood cholesterol levels, increasing the numbers of adults with diabetes whose condition has been diagnosed, and increasing the numbers of adults with diabetes whose glycosylated hemoglobin is measured at least once a year.¹¹

Bridging the gaps

Pharmacists should be proactive in screening and recognizing disease states that may be more prevalent in certain ethnic groups.

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Pharmacists should partner with community groups, governmental agencies, healthcare provider organizations, payers, and others to increase awareness of specific diseases among certain populations.⁸

As part of disease prevention, pharmacists in their capacity as immunizers can help reduce the low immunization rates in certain minority populations. In 2004, the estimated percentage of adults age 65 years and older who received prophylaxis against influenza was 67% for whites, 55% for Hispanics, and 45% for African Americans.²

Pharmacists can also play a significant role in helping patients with chronic disease management and medication adherence through medication therapy management.

It is also crucial for pharmacists not to overlook the importance of patient education in promoting healthy lifestyles such as diet and exercise.

As pharmacists become increasingly familiar with health disparities among ethnically diverse populations, they can make a significant contribution toward

improvement in the quality of healthcare, now and in the future.

These public health challenges can provide an opportunity for pharmacists to become catalysts in the community, leading the way toward bridging these gaps in healthcare. **DT**

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Jessica Vargas is a PharmD candidate at Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale.

Christina Dang is a PharmD candidate at University of Maryland School of Pharmacy, Baltimore.

Vaiyapuri Subramaniam, PharmD, MS, is associate chief consultant, pharmacy benefits management, Department of Veterans Affairs, Washington D.C.

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