



LEADING PATIENTS TO

wellness

by Rosalind Stefanac

Cover Story

Is it any wonder that a natural health product

or power food mentioned by the now infamous Dr. Mehmet Oz goes conspicuously missing from your pharmacy shelves—or that it's the one patients are suddenly asking about? Marketers call it the "Oz Effect," but many pharmacists say it's just one more indication of a growing trend towards wellness as patients seek healthier lifestyles.

"Before, I would be the one recommending echinacea and oil of oregano, and now they're coming in and asking me—it's come full circle," says Victoria, B.C. pharmacist Ian Lloyd of Cadboro Bay Peoples' Pharmacy. A chartered herbalist, Lloyd has been educating patients (and pharmacists, as this magazine's NHP Forum columnist) about natural health products for more than a decade. "As well as being more proactive now, patients are more receptive to the information we're providing as pharmacists."

According to a 2011 government-issued report, *Health and Wellness Trends for Canada and the World*, an aging population, high obesity rates and a raised awareness of unhealthy foods are fueling our desire to become healthier. Seniors in particular are spending significant amounts of money on better food, exercise equipment and supplements in an effort to maintain a certain level of vitality long into their retirement.

It's this increasing push toward wellness that prompted Bob Mehr to re-focus his business under the Pure Integrative Pharmacy banner—a 16-store chain known for offering a blend traditional and complementary remedies. Mehr says 80% of his pharmacy patrons these days are seeking NHPs to complement traditional medication. "Even the doctors are extremely open to it, writing notes for Co-Enzyme Q10, Vitamin D or probiotics at the back of prescriptions," he says. "This is the way of the future."

Mehr says the research proves that some traditional medications deplete the body of essential vitamins and minerals and patients are looking for ways to counteract that. "If someone is taking birth control pills, they should be considering a vitamin B6 and folic acid," he says. "And for cholesterol patients, we know statins can block enzymes so when they use supplements they get better results."

His big "aha" moment came when he was working with cancer patients and discovered that those who complemented their conventional cancer treatment with natural remedies had a better quality of life than those who didn't. But vitamins and supplements aren't the only part, he stresses. "It's about lifestyle and exercise, meditation and even having more laughter in your day."

LOOK AT THE WHOLE PERSON

Determining potential health gaps in patients' overall lifestyle is essential in helping them on the path to wellness, says pharmacist Carolyn Whiskin, a certified menopause practitioner who has her own consulting practice in addition to working part-time at Brant Arts Dispensary in Burlington, Ont. "When someone comes in for a [compounded] cream to treat something, that's only part of the solution," she says. "Is the patient eating well, exercising, and what other vitamins could she be taking at this time?" Whiskin says asking questions like these will help get to the root of the issue. For example, if someone has hair loss, maybe her thyroid levels are off or increased stress is playing a factor.

Whiskin, who sees patients by appointment, has also developed a good network within her community to refer patients to. "It's not just about the supplements, but knowing about the community resources out there that can help, and thinking in a broader perspective," she says. "I think we can do a better job of that than physicians can in a five-minute appointment."

Like Mehr, she says doctors are increasingly receptive to alternative approaches that complement traditional therapy. "Half the people who see me are referred to by their doctors and it's very rare that physicians won't take my recommendations once I explain my rationale."

Dragana Skokovic-Sunjic, also a certified menopause practitioner focused on natural health, says a big—and sometimes overlooked—part of overall wellness is prevention. "For wellness, we tend to think of people who already have issues in dealing with a disease, but improving quality of life with prevention is key too," says Skokovic-Sunjic who splits her time between the Hamilton Family Health Team (FHT) and her own Hamilton, Ont.-based consulting practice.

Bob Mehr



Carolyn Whiskin



Dragana Skokovic-Sunjic



"You have to be comfortable stepping outside the pharmacy, literally, to promote wellness"



**WHAT'S
PLAGUING
PATIENTS?**

We asked pharmacists what patients asking about natural health products are most often seeking help for:

- Anxiety/stress
- Cancer treatment
- Chronic fatigue or adrenal fatigue
- Cognitive function
- Pain management
- Inflammation
 - Immune system boosters
- Weight loss

The FHT started a running club for adolescents, so pharmacists are involved in promoting physical activity, and Skokovic-Sunjic also speaks on health and wellness within her local community. In the past, she and her pharmacy team have conducted small, educational sessions for women on wellness-related issues, such as nutrition, hormone use and OTC options. With the growing interest in probiotics, she has developed a list of the probiotic supplements available in Canada and their clinical evidence to date, which she updates annually. She offers it to healthcare companies for a licensing fee to use in their printed materials or on their websites.

"You have to be comfortable stepping outside the pharmacy, literally, to promote wellness," says Skokovic-Sunjic. "There are so many areas where pharmacists can get involved."

EVERY PATIENT IS AN INDIVIDUAL

She also believes many pharmacists are still missing out on the opportunity to be a vital source of wellness information right in their own pharmacies. "We should be more proactive in telling patients we are positioned to help them proceed to wellness," she says, noting that there is a huge difference between going into a health food store and picking up whatever is on special and sitting down with a pharmacist to review your medication history. "The key is individualizing the process, because every patient is different and has different goals in terms of quality of life and treatment."

Skokovic-Sunjic says pharmacists should be aware of NHPs that may affect patients' other medications and help them select supplements that will be most effective. She notes that even some established brands change their composition strain, so something that used to be effective for a patient may not work anymore.

"I still find that some pharmacists aren't embracing NHPs or even enhancing their knowledge about them because of the lack of evidence," she says. "We have to remember, patients will be taking these products whether we advise them to or not."

Seventy-year-old Walter Stuart of Woodstock, Ont., adheres to an extensive daily vitamin regimen and says he is well-read on the topic. Still, he relies on his pharmacist Lee Tuan to help pick out the brands that are best for him. "My wife and I have spent thousands of dollars on vitamins and I know Lee is as knowledgeable about them as he is about regular medication." In fact, when Tuan opened his pharmacy All About Health Remedy'sRX in 2010, Stuart followed him. "I congratulate him on what he's doing in working with people and putting these types of products into his pharmacy."

Tuan says most people these days are educated about NHPs and know what they're looking for, but some information is misleading. "It's our responsibility to educate them further and ensure they aren't adding risks to any health conditions."

Tuan says as a certified personal trainer, health and wellness has always been his passion. Being able to offer consultations on lifestyle and weight management also distinguishes his practice from the big box pharmacies in the area. For a recent seminar, he invited a holistic practitioner to talk about weight management through nutrition and supplementation that was free for patients. "People are improving their conditions based on what we're recommending," he says. "We work with naturopaths and medical doctors and they cross reference their patients to us."

While Tuan gets clients from all demographics, he sees more parents seeking advice on natural remedies for their children. "They're looking for general supplements and vitamins for cognitive development, but there are also issues with anxiety among children," he says. Omega-3s are what he recommends for brain boosting, and he also stocks a host of probiotics—in child-friendly formats—to help children with digestion.

KEEP LEARNING

Tuan says as a pharmacist providing wellness advice, he has to keep learning. "You can't stop learning because wellness trends keep changing and you have to keep on top of them."

Cadboro Bay's Lloyd agrees. "I read what my patients are reading, and I watch Dr. Oz too," he says. "If they ask me something I haven't heard about, I'll look it up and always get back to them."

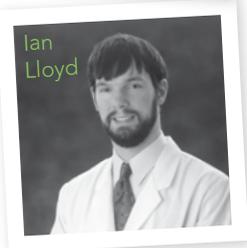
For those pharmacists just starting to dip their toes into the pool of natural healthcare, Lloyd advises starting small, condition by condition, so as not to get overwhelmed. "We all do medication reviews and questions come up," he says. If someone has psoriasis, for example, gluten is something to consider. "Even a mild gluten intolerance can cause skin reactions like psoriasis—so take that one topic and learn about it this month."

Lloyd says wellness also entails changing patients' mindsets, especially when it comes to expected outcomes of NHPs and positive lifestyle changes. "Some have big healthcare goals to get off all their medications and run a marathon," he says. "We need to help them break their goals into small bits; they may not get to the end point, but they'll still be a lot better than they are now." □

ROSALIND STEFANAC IS A TORONTO WRITER AND FORMER EDITOR OF PHARMACY PRACTICE.



Lee Tuan



Ian Lloyd