



FINDING YOUR NICHE: DEALING WITH ADDICTION

PROVIDING HOPE WHEN PATIENTS HIT ROCK BOTTOM

BY ROSALIND STEFANAC

It's no secret that Canada is in the midst of an opioid crisis. According to a 2019 national government report on *Apparent Opioid-related Deaths in Canada*, one life lost every two hours in 2018 was related to opioids, and 94% of these deaths were unintended. In fact, for the first time in four decades, life expectancy has plateaued in Canada, largely due to opioid misuse.

With statistics like these, you would think that every pharmacy in the country would be providing services to help patients facing opioid addiction issues, but that's clearly not the case. Those pharmacists distributing treatments such as methadone and naloxone say stigma and misconceptions about the type of patients who have addictions are some of the factors still preventing more people from getting involved.

"When we do educational sessions in the community and hear that pharmacists aren't offering methadone or naloxone, it can mean patients are having to drive 40 minutes a day for treatment and that's just not right," says Kelly Grindrod, an associate professor at the University of Waterloo's School of Pharmacy.

For the last four years, Grindrod has been working as a clinical pharmacist as part of a primary care team at the Kitchener Downtown Community Health

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Talking to patients and creating those trusting relationships is a key part of the job, says Pharmacist Rich Rego with a patient in downtown Calgary.

Centre, which treats vulnerable patients often dealing with addictions. Prior to that Grindrod also worked in hospital and community settings in downtown Vancouver, where patients with similar issues were the norm. "Sure, there are patients who are difficult, but the vast majority are ones you form [professional] relationships with because you see them

every day and that's so rewarding," she says. "When I was working with methadone, we saw patients stabilize, find housing and even have their first child."

Calgary pharmacist Rich Rego, who has been specializing in addiction care for the last 12 years, says seeing patients thrive is the best part of his job. "The success stories are what keeps me going," says Rego, who owns two pharmacies and runs the first injectable opioid agonist (iOA) treatment for opioid use disorder clinic in Alberta. "Just the other day a girl we looked after had a baby and came back to thank us—when you do get those success stories months or even a year later, you realize what an impact you've had."

For Rego, specializing in addictions has also opened doors to teaching opportunities, speaking engagements and even an on-camera role in a high-profile 2018 documentary called *Painkiller* about Canada's opioid crisis (www.telus.com/en/health/personal/painkiller). "I wasn't looking for those opportunities but they found me because of my expertise," he says, noting that his real education still comes from the day to day interaction with patients. "They're my ultimate teachers." Rego says he is always willing to share insights and advice with pharmacists interested in providing services for addiction patients.

In an effort to get more pharmacists across Canada involved in this critical

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patient care area, Grindrod is part of group working on a national naloxone and harm reduction education program for pharmacists to launch in 2020. (Pharmacists can contact her directly [kgrindrod@uwaterloo.ca] for further details.) “In a smaller rural community especially, you can connect with the local public health nurse and paramedic and you might even become the main distributor of naloxone in the area,” she says. “Or you can just be a pharmacist with a handful of patients that need this care and that can be so impactful too.”

In addition to being professionally rewarding, helping patients with addictions can make good business sense too. Pharmacy owner John Girgis first started offering specialized services for patients with addictions in his Liberty Village Pharmacy in Toronto about 10 years ago and they now make up about

20% of the clientele. He has since spun off variations of the program in all four of his pharmacy locations too. “A lot of people misunderstand addiction as not being a disease state,” he says. “But this is not a lifestyle choice and these patients are often facing many multi-faceted issues that include mental health and trauma.”

Girgis got certified in psychiatry and pain management through the U.S. and aligned himself with pain management physicians in the area to formulate a program that would be as effective as possible for patients with addiction-related issues. Part of that includes an opioid risk tool assessment to determine if a patient might be at risk. “We do a lot of out-of-the-box compounding too, with different concentrations to help alleviate withdrawal that comes with stopping opioids,” he says.

Given the sensitive nature of this disease state, Girgis doesn’t advertise his addiction services either. Referrals come through physicians and nurse practitioners or patient word of mouth. “It’s all about patient empowerment,” he says. “We allow them to see that they have the will and ability to get off these substances and we coach them through that.” ➕

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RESOURCES FOR ADDICTION CARE



The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (<https://www.camh.ca/en/education/continuing-education>)

Canadian Society of Addiction Medicine (<https://csam-smca.org/>)

Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (<https://www.ccsa.ca/>)

National Institute on Drug Abuse (<https://www.drugabuse.gov/>)

STUDY: Allowing Pharmacists to Directly Dispense Opioid Antidote Can Cut Opioid Overdose Deaths (<https://www.rand.org/news/press/2019/05/06.html>)

Toward the heart (<https://towardtheheart.com/>)



How do I specialize?

Organizations like the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health offer some great continuing education courses on addiction for pharmacists and other healthcare providers. Additionally, the Canadian and American societies of addiction medicine have educational resources for healthcare professionals. Before starting to offer addiction services in your own workplace, consider getting more frontline experience by lending your time to local outreach programs or a primary healthcare team who deals with vulnerable clients.

Ensure your pharmacy is well equipped to provide care for patients facing addiction issues by offering methadone/naloxone programs and having private counselling spaces; be aware of other resources you can refer patients to in the community and connect with other healthcare providers who can refer people to you. Pharmacists specializing in this area say it can be useful to get further certification in pain education and psychiatric care, available through the U.S.