

Emphasizing the Role of Pharmacist as a Researcher: The Lebanese Order of Pharmacists' Perspective

Dear Editor,

Pharmacy is an ever-changing profession all over the world. In 1997, the World Health Organization introduced the “Seven-star pharmacist” concept covering the different roles each pharmacist must perform: caregiver, decision-maker, communicator, manager, life-long-learner, teacher, and leader.^[1] Two additional roles (researcher and entrepreneur) were introduced later, leading to the “Nine-star pharmacist,”^[2] thus emphasizing the importance of research within professional practice and academia.

While it is not expected that all pharmacists conduct research projects, it is vital that pharmacists who are not interested in research would yet understand research concepts, the general process, and be able to assess the validity and credibility of research conducted by others. Having such knowledge will enable the researcher to successfully include research data and conclusions into useful reports/documents. However, the researcher–pharmacist wishing to conduct field research will need a much higher level of understanding in this discipline, which makes graduate studies an exciting option.

In Lebanon, the vast majority of pharmacists have a Bachelor of Sciences (BS Pharm) or a Doctor of Pharmacy (PharmD) degree, while very few have a master degree, and even fewer have a PhD. Despite a potentially high demand for specialized pharmacists, a small number of researchers with much-needed skills graduate yearly. While some faculties of pharmacy in Lebanon offer master and PhD degrees to meet this growing need,^[3] the field does not seem to be appealing for pharmacy graduates, and it is estimated that around 15 pharmacists pursue a PhD out of 450

graduates (3.33%) annually. There are various reasons why most pharmacists choose not to advance their education (or move forward with their education). First, the Ministry of Public health does not recognize research degrees as a specialty, the majority of available positions for pharmacists are in fields where research-related skills are not required while pharmacists have no clear idea about the scope of research degrees and its importance in any area of practice.

Moreover, there are very few research positions in specialized research centers in Lebanon. Even in academia where research should be most valued, recruitment, promotion, and remuneration of pharmacists take into account teaching and service components rather than research activity in the majority of Lebanese universities. Furthermore, budget constraints and subsequently, the quality of publishable papers might hinder the submission for publication in high-impact peer-reviewed journals (7).

In view of what was said, a competency framework for pharmacists was identified as a critical requirement in the development of undergraduate and postgraduate education for pharmacists in Lebanon. Hence, the Lebanese Order of Pharmacists (OPL, the official pharmacy association in Lebanon) developed the core competency framework for pharmacists that comprised the minimal competencies required for several pharmacy specialties, including those of a researcher–pharmacist.

For all research pharmacists, competencies encompassed one major core axis, the soft skills. This axis is focused on five major domains: (1) critical thinking/scientific inquisitiveness/ethical thinking, and research conduct/strategic thinking; (2) oral and written

communication/grantsmanship; (3) interprofessional collaboration and teamwork/leadership; (4) project management including planning and time management, and (5) information and information technology. This core axis was deemed to be familiar to all fields of research. Additional expertise competencies were adapted to every research field (researcher in any field, researcher in basic pharmaceutical sciences, researcher in human interventional trials, and researcher in applied pharmacy practice and pharmaceutical fields of public health importance).

For researcher–pharmacists working in basic pharmaceutical sciences, the expertise axis included basic science expertise, analysis tool expertise, conducting basic research expertise, and drug development process expertise. For pharmacists working in interventional clinical trials, the minimal expertise competencies included translational/clinical skills, analysis tool expertise, and clinical/translational research conduction expertise. For research pharmacists interested in applied pharmacy practice, the minimal competencies related to expertise focused on generating epidemiological and pharmacoepidemiological data, contributing to disease surveillance, drug errors and adverse drug reaction (including side effects) surveillance, validating measurement tools, analyzing associations between potential risk factors and health status, comparing therapeutic methods effectiveness, answering controversial therapeutic matters, and contributing to the elaboration of therapeutic recommendations.

Now that the first version of Lebanese research-related competencies is set, efforts should be deployed to ensure that competent authorities implement them and diffuse them to academic institutions to abide by them when developing curricula and to professional institutions who might hire researcher–pharmacists.

New policies are required in pharmacy research to encourage hiring researchers in universities, pharmaceutical institutions, and research centers and to promote research-requiring professions, thus improving the quality of health and pharmaceutical services delivered in Lebanon.

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Conflicts of interest

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