Innovative Approaches in Asia Pacific

Improving community pharmacy services by studying organizational theory

Shane Scahill, PhD candidate
School of Pharmacy, The University of Auckland, New Zealand
E-mail: s.scahill@auckland.ac.nz

Key words: Organizational theory, community pharmacy, pharmacy services

Background
The world over community pharmacy is small business, providing varying levels of healthcare, some of which is government funded, dependent on country and continent. In the developed world community pharmacy sits as an organization within a health care system that is driven both by government policy and private market forces.

Community pharmacy services can be improved by understanding community pharmacy as an organization and by applying organizational theories to this setting. In the Asia Pacific region pharmacy practice researchers are only just beginning to apply organizational theory to pharmacy practice, mainly in the area of practice change for delivery of enhanced services such as medicines review\(^1\). In this brief commentary, organizational theory and its application within community pharmacy will be introduced.

What is organizational theory?

Organizational studies encompass the study of organizations from multiple viewpoints, using multiple methods, levels and types of analysis. In general, studies are divided into two main areas. Firstly, "micro" or organizational behavior which refers to individual and group dynamics in an organizational setting. Secondly, "macro" organizational theory which studies whole organizations, the environments within which they function, the policy that drives them, how they adapt and change, and the strategies and structures that guide them\(^2\).

Community pharmacy as an organization

By definition, an organization is itself a system which creates and distributes value to key stakeholders\(^3\). In the developed world, primary health care policy is having a significant impact on the value that community pharmacy is required to deliver\(^4, 5\). In the case of community pharmacy, key stakeholders may include government policy makers, health funding and planning bodies, or health care professionals including doctors and nurses, the patient and even the wider community.

The expectation on community pharmacy is to be an effective primary care provider in terms of delivering
patient oriented services. In addition to the traditional manufacturing and dispensing of medicines, community pharmacy is expected to deliver value through these enhanced services (such as medication review) which stretch the boundaries of what community pharmacy has offered in the past.

**Organization theories, culture and community pharmacy**
One concept borrowed from anthropology and adopted by organizational theorists that can be applied to community pharmacy is the notion of organizational culture. This concept is best understood as ‘the way we do things around here’. In this sense, culture can be described as the accepted behaviours and activities that are deemed to be normal practice which are underpinned by beliefs and values that drive common meaning and behaviour within a workplace such as a community pharmacy.

One example would be the pharmacist remaining in the dispensary counting tablets as opposed to having the confidence to step out of the dispensary and undertake medicines reviews or counsel patients. However, organizational culture is difficult to change as compared to the simple structural modifications in organizational systems.

The human factor within “organizational behavior” is significant and although it was defined previously as micro organisational in nature, the effects can certainly be seen at a macro level. To some extent the success of an organization lies with better understanding of the needs and motivations of the individuals within it. At least in one country in Asia Pacific the way pharmacists think and act may be influencing the degree to which value will be created by community pharmacy into the future.

This is also the case in parts of Europe. In this context, there is a need to change both the systems as well as how people act to achieve effective community pharmacies. It is in this context that applying organizational theory to community pharmacy may generate its greatest gains.

**Applying theories to practice**
Community pharmacy is an organization and therefore by definition a system. Thinking in these terms allows us to postulate and study how pharmacy might be best designed and managed to create and distribute the value alluded to it previously. In the context of change we can systematically address questions such as; who will be served, with what and how? What resources are required, what should the organizational design include and what are the important processes that need to be put in place to deliver value in an effective manner.

Of course, taking a purely systems view suggests that to improve service provision, all we need to do is to make structural changes such as ensuring the correct people are working at the right level within the pharmacy and having processes in place that streamline business activities. This is very unlikely to be the case as in addition to structural change; significant human
change will be required to ‘move the masses’.

References


