Cultural awareness and cultural safety

By Lucy Skellett

Learning objectives
After reading this article you should be able to:
• Discuss the importance of cultural awareness and sensitivity when providing pharmacy services
• Recognise how personal cultural values can impact on interactions with consumers
• Identify potential strategies to ensure pharmacy services are delivered in a culturally appropriate way.

Competency standards (2010) addressed: 1.2, 1.5, 3.3, 3.4
Accreditation number: CAP120505b

Working effectively in cross cultural situations
In order to work effectively in cross cultural situations, pharmacists need to have cultural awareness and sensitivity. If cultural awareness and sensitivity is applied the health professional can create an interaction and environment in which the patient feels ‘safe’. Cultural safety is an environment in which there is mutual respect, openness and willingness to listen, and there is shared understanding and acknowledgment of the unique identity of others. This article discusses cultural attitudes and behaviours and examines how cultural safety can be incorporated into pharmacists’ daily practice.

Cultural awareness begins with learning about other cultures.1 In order to interact and work alongside different cultural groups, a pharmacist needs to be familiar with the history, values and belief systems of ethnic groups. The Nursing Council of New Zealand guidelines for cultural safety state that culture encompasses, but is not restricted to, ‘age or generation; gender; sexual orientation; occupation and socioeconomic status; ethnic origin or migrant experience; religious or spiritual belief; and disability’.2 However, cultural awareness training is insufficient on its own: it is the initial step towards understanding that there are differences in culture.2 Cultural sensitivity and safety training are also required1 to change the paradigm of cultural ways of thinking and behaving.

Gaining cultural sensitivity requires internal reflection on one’s own cultural beliefs, attitudes and conditioning in order to truly value and respect those of others.1 Understanding cultural similarities and differences without assigning values or judging behaviours is to be culturally sensitive.3 A pharmacist needs to be accepting of others; he or she may need to learn how to apply new understandings of the traditions and ways of life of other cultures, even if they are different to one’s own background. To have preconceptions about other cultures and to consciously or even unconsciously be prejudiced and judgmental about cultural differences can lead to misunderstanding and mistrust and consequent break down in interpersonal communication.4

The concept of ‘cultural safety’ originated in New Zealand in the 1980s. The term derived from Maori nursing students’ experiences of ongoing racism in the nursing education system.5 Maori nurses felt that they were not being treated as equals and their working environment was not culturally safe.6 Irihapeti Ramsden, a Maori student nurse at that time, voiced her concerns: ‘You people talk about legal safety, ethical safety, and safety in clinical practices and a safe knowledge base, but what of cultural safety?’6 Cultural safety has been described by Williams as, ‘an environment, which is safe for people; where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what, they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience, of learning together with dignity, and truly listening’.5 Cultural safety promotes culturally safe interactions in health care settings.
it enables patients to feel empowered and question their health care. Cultural safety also involves health practitioners examining hierarchy or power relationships with their patients and realising the detrimental effects this can have on health outcomes. Pharmacists may be totally unaware of the power of their authoritative position and how this and underlying negative attitudes may have an adverse cultural impact on others. Offering services in a way that is sensitive and respectful is likely to be experienced as ‘safe’ and consequently more acceptable and effective. It is therefore important to recognise cultural diversity and how treatments need to be culturally appropriate: sometimes the ‘best’ treatment option may not be the most culturally appropriate, e.g. a patient refusing treatment for cancer because of spiritual beliefs. There are many different cultural realities and ways of thinking which need to be respected. Openness and engagement of other cultural realities leads to an establishment of trust which results in successful negotiation. Pharmacists need to build relationships and engage with their ethnically diverse patients so that they can discuss and understand their patients’ beliefs and realities.

Pharmacists should critically evaluate their work practice and strive towards providing a culturally appropriate service delivery environment that is free from cultural prejudices and preconceptions and in which clients are treated respectfully. In such an environment there is respect for distinctive customs, traditions, procedures and practices.

**Cultural awareness**

Cultural awareness begins with knowledge. In Aboriginal culture for example, there are sacred rituals and events in which specific information is shared. Sometimes these gatherings are specifically between those of the same gender. This is referred to as ‘women’s business and men’s business’. Aboriginal patients may not feel comfortable discussing certain topics with a person of the opposite gender. Cultural sensitivity would involve personal reflection of this custom and acceptance of the difference in cultural traditions. Cultural safety, in this case, would involve recognising cultural differences and looking at ways to ensure an Aboriginal patient felt at ease talking about specific women’s or men’s issues, such as menstruation or erectile dysfunction. Wherever possible, a pharmacist/assistant of the same gender should attend to the patient’s needs or, if there is no staff member of the same gender available, ask for the patient’s consent to talk about the issue. Sometimes a family member can assist. Pharmacists may also need to provide a private environment for discussion of sensitive issues. Pharmacists need to be aware of cultural differences and make patients feel as culturally safe as possible, but this should not mean that important information is withheld from patients – ‘Primum non nocere, First do no harm’. Increased cultural safety in the pharmacy setting has numerous benefits. If patients feel comfortable they are more likely to return. Pharmacists’ commitment to cultural knowledge and sensitivity leads to stronger patient and community relationships and overall better health care. In contrast, if patients do not feel culturally safe they may be less likely to access health care and this can lead to poor outcomes and sub-optimal health care. Patients may refuse treatment, be non-adherent and less likely to follow up if services and their staff are not culturally appropriate. Cultural safety is about how culturally safe patients feel when accessing health care. Pharmacists can evaluate how well they are providing cultural safety by assessing their patients’ responses:

- Are patients open to communication, asking questions about their health care or are they withdrawn and reticent?
- Do patients frequently visit the pharmacy or do they come once and never return?
- Do patients attend themselves or do they purposely send others to collect their medicines to avoid contact?
- Are patients from different ethnicities or are they from a homogeneous culture?
- Do patients express their satisfaction with the pharmacy service or do they complain about lack of understanding?

**Environmental changes**

In a diverse cultural environment, artworks and books should be displayed to reflect the range of languages and cultural identities. Health information posters and leaflets portraying different ethnic groups and languages make people feel more comfortable in the acknowledgment of cultural identity. A space which offers privacy should be made available for health counselling.

**Communication changes**

Clear communication is necessary in providing culturally safe health care. Communication difficulties can impede positive health outcomes. Research indicates that ideal communication occurs between people of the same ‘linguistic and cultural background’. Interpreter services and cultural liaison workers are an excellent way to achieve this. If they are not available, staff training in interpersonal cultural communication is essential to maintain effective communication for safe care. The onus for change is often placed on the non-dominant culture, yet power distance can frequently inhibit people from speaking up. It is therefore imperative that health professionals ‘flatten the hierarchy, create familiarity and make it feel safe to speak up and participate’. Pharmacists need to provide the appropriate advice but in jargon free, plain language, with the assistance of diagrams, written resources and visual aids, especially when literacy levels are low or when English is not the first language. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients pharmacists should work with local Aboriginal Health Workers to assist in the translation of language, ideas and concepts. Creating a dynamic in which people can freely express their concerns is a key factor in providing safety of care.
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**Staff changes**

To ensure cultural safety is maintained in the workplace, it is important that practices are regularly reviewed and discussed at staff meetings. Often a pharmacy assistant is the first point of contact when a person enters a pharmacy, so it is essential that all staff receive training. Staff can advise others on culturally appropriate health care for specific groups. Organising a visit to a local homogenous centre, such as an Aboriginal Health Service or a Refugee Health Service broadens cultural awareness and enhances positive relationships between cultures. Employing staff from other cultures can improve cultural safety for patients. In addition, staff from different cultural backgrounds can teach other staff members about their culture and therefore enhance culturally safety.

**Training changes**

Many different cultural training courses are offered around Australia. Cultural training for all staff is an excellent way to improve the effectiveness of services. A good way to find appropriate training courses is to look locally as this usually best reflects the culture of the area. Courses that are accredited or approved by places such as PSA, RACGP, the Pharmacy Guild or NACCHO should indicate the cultural training course is of a high standard. If nothing is available locally, there are a number of online Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural competence courses. The Centre for Cultural Competence Australia has an online course which is currently accredited by the Pharmacy Guild. (see: www.ccca.com.au) This course provides good background, but does not refer directly to health or pharmacy settings. Pharmacists may also refer to other resources such as the PSA Professional Practice Standards 2010.11 While these Indigenous cultural awareness training courses are recognised as important, they are only the first step. Relationship building with Aboriginal Health Services and their staff, and working with Aboriginal patients, are also important components in assisting pharmacists to become culturally aware. Cultural safety is important from a broad public health perspective as cultural insensitivity can lead to poor health outcomes. Aboriginal patients access health services less than non-Aboriginal patients. This has partially been attributed to lack of culturally appropriate services.12 It is widely recognised that one of the reasons for the marked difference in life expectancy between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians is the lack of culturally appropriate health care. As a part of the overall Australian health system, pharmacists need to have a genuine commitment to the theory and practice of cultural awareness, sensitivity and safety. These are all important factors in providing culturally appropriate health care service in which there is respect and recognition of others, personal empowerment and enhanced communication in a safe, sensitive and supportive environment.

**References**

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**Questions**

1. Cultural safety is a concept that originated in which country?
   a) Australia.
   b) America.
   c) Canada.
   d) New Zealand.

2. Which statement is CORRECT?
   a) Cultural safety is achieved by cultural awareness training alone.
   b) Cultural awareness and cultural safety are the same.
   c) Cultural safety training is important for all pharmacy staff not just pharmacists.
   d) Cultural safety cannot be experienced by patients.

3. Pharmacists can make their pharmacy service more culturally appropriate by:
   a) employing staff from other cultures.
   b) displaying health information posters which show people from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds and providing leaflets in different languages.
   c) organising a staff visit to a health service which specialises in culturally appropriate health care for a specific ethnic group in order to develop relationships and learn about another culture.
   d) all of the above.

4. Which of the following terms is best used to describe learning facts and figures about another culture?
   a) Cultural safety.
   b) Cultural awareness.
   c) Cultural sensitivity.
   d) Cultural ignorance.

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