

Disposal of unwanted medications: a safer home for the elderly

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Background

Many elderly patients hoard on different types of medicines, mostly prescription medicines. They store piles of old and unwanted medicines around the home, increasing the risk of medication misadventure and harm. The role of outreach pharmacists in facilitating the safe disposal of medicines has been under reported. This study aimed to describe the role of outreach pharmacists in promoting the safe disposal of drug waste and reducing medication cost.

Methods

During home visits to elderly patients, pharmacists started to collect the medicines that have expired, or are no longer needed by patients. This study looked at all the medicines collected over a period of 2 months. We recorded the types of medication groups and the number of packs in each group. An estimate of the value of this medicinal waste was also made. The main outcome measures were the number of medicines collected in the various therapeutic groups, and an estimate of their monetary value.

Results

Collected medicines fell into 11 therapeutic groups, with 293 packs collected. The largest number of medicines belonged to the cardiovascular group. The number of patients seen was 40 patients, with each patient having an average of 7.3 medication packs that are either expired or unnecessary. The estimated value of medicinal waste per patient is about AU\$1308 annually.

Discussion

Elderly patients are vulnerable because of the risk factors they might have, e.g. vision impairment and poor literacy. The seriousness of the types of medicines they hoard necessitates particular attention by visiting clinicians. Cardiovascular medicines are the main group that ends up being wasted, and is among the most expensive to subsidize. Outreach pharmacists are in a good position to collect unnecessary medicines, and make the homes of elderly patients safer. They also educate on the prudent use of government subsidy of medicines and the appropriate dispensing of prescriptions.