

Patient knowledge and acceptability of topical corticosteroid preparations: the role of the pharmacist in patient education

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Introduction Skin disease is widespread with 15–20 per cent of all general practitioner (GP) consultations resulting from dermatological conditions.¹ There is anecdotal evidence that the general population appears reluctant to use corticosteroid preparations. This study was designed to evaluate the level of patient knowledge and acceptability of topical corticosteroids and to determine the impact of directed pharmacist counselling.

Method The study was conducted between July and December 2000 in a rural pharmacy (population 4,000) served by one dispensing medical practice (six GPs, list size 10,500). Patients (>12 years) or parents (of patients <12 years old) presenting to the pharmacist with a topical corticosteroid prescription were questioned using a semi-structured format on their perception of the acceptability of topical steroids, knowledge of steroid use and potential side effects.

Responses to each topic were scored 0–2 (where 0 reflected “unacceptable” or “no knowledge” and 2 indicated “happy to use” or “fully aware”) by RW according to pre-set criteria. Parents of patients aged between 0 and 5 years were interviewed further to determine if structured counselling by the pharmacist could improve perceptions of acceptability. A five-point visual scale (stylised faces ranging from happy to sad) that converted to a percentage analogue reading was used to determine the parents’ perception of acceptability in this phase of the study. Results are presented as arithmetic means \pm standard errors of the mean.

Results Patients’ knowledge about steroid use and side effects peaked in the 20–29 year age group, then declined with advancing age, but scores for acceptability remained high throughout the adult age range (13–89 years) (see Table 1).

Parents of children (aged 0–5) scored highest on both knowledge of preparation and side effects but lowest on acceptability of steroid use (Table 1). This finding was supported by the visual scale scores for ac-

FOCAL POINTS

- Patients presenting to the pharmacist with a topical corticosteroid prescription were questioned using a semi-structured format on their perception of the acceptability of topical steroids, knowledge of steroid use and potential side effects
- Patients’ knowledge about steroid use and side effects peaked in the 20–29 year age group, then declined with advancing age but scores for acceptability remained high throughout the adult age range
- Parents of children (aged 0–5 years) scored highest on both knowledge of preparation and side effects but lowest on acceptability of steroid use
- Following counselling by the pharmacist, parents showed an increase in their acceptability towards topical steroids from an average score of 47 per cent to an average score of 66 per cent
- This study demonstrates a need for information and education in the users of topical steroids

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Table 1: Average scores for patient acceptability, knowledge, and side effects of corticosteroids according to age

Age group (years)	Number of patients in group (n)	Average score of acceptability of corticosteroids (max = 2)	Average score of knowledge about corticosteroids side effects (max = 2)	Average score of knowledge about corticosteroid (max = 2)	Average total (max = 6)
0–5	27	1.30	1.41	1.22	3.93
6–12	14	1.79	1.00	0.64	3.43
13–19	4	2.00	1.00	0.75	3.75
20–29	13	2.00	1.15	1.15	4.31
30–39	32	1.88	1.09	0.75	3.72
40–49	22	2.00	1.09	0.73	3.82
50–59	20	1.85	1.00	0.65	3.50
60–69	21	1.95	0.76	0.52	3.24
70–79	33	1.94	0.48	0.36	2.79
80–89	17	1.82	0.24	0.18	2.24

ceptability. Any parent with an acceptability score of ≥ 80 per cent ($n=15/27$) was deemed to feel that the preparation was very acceptable and was not counselled further. Other parents ($n=12/27$) were counselled and re-evaluated. The results from this indicated a significant increase in acceptability from an average score of 46.7 ± 3.9 per cent to an average score of 66.3 ± 2.1 per cent in those patients counselled by the pharmacist ($P < 0.01$, paired t-test).

Discussion Most adult patients considered topical corticosteroids to be acceptable but were less well educated about the preparations and their side effects. This difference was par-

ticularly noticeable in elderly patients where there was poor knowledge of these drugs and their side-effects. There was also evidence that in general, parents of young children considered these agents to be less acceptable than other adults.

The study demonstrates a potential need for information and education in these user groups and the community pharmacist is ideally placed to provide this information and so to aid improvements in patient compliance.

References

1. Anon. Skin changes. *Dermatol Prac* 1995;3(4):8.