

ASK ME! I'M A PHARMACIST

Jonathan Silcock says Ask About Medicines Week is an appropriate time to review how pharmacists ask questions and how they answer their customers' questions

How do we ask questions? In our day-to-day business, we usually ask customers questions to confirm or obtain some important piece of information. In this situation, "important" means that we need the information to help give appropriate advice or dispense safely. The agenda is mainly professional and is often narrow. Typically, questions are direct, require simple answers and are of the WWHAM type: Who is the patient? What is the problem? How long has it been a problem? What action has been taken? What other medicines are taken?

PROBLEM WITH CLOSED QUESTIONS

I recently requested some over-the-counter ibuprofen at a local pharmacy and was asked: Is it for you? Have you taken it before? Do you have asthma? Have you ever had an allergic reaction to this? My revealing answers were "yes", "yes", "no" and "no". Mutual understanding to promote health it was not. Curiously, the assistant missed out "Do you have any stomach problems?". Luckily I do not, but this illustrates one problem with simple closed questions: the danger of forgetting something or missing a piece of important information.

Without a preamble like "I just need to ask a couple of questions to make sure this medicine is right for you. Would that be OK?", these questions also feel like interrogation. I instantly felt uncomfortable and unable to say, simply, "I've taken these lots of times before for occasional bad headaches and none of the warnings on the pack apply to me".

Perhaps, given the chance, I would have said: "I'm a pharmacist. Leave me alone." I hope not, but we should be sensitive to particular customer needs and remember that some will have health or medical training. The Government is also encouraging many people with chronic diseases to become "expert patients". When time is short, direct questions may be the only way to do business. However, direct questions often do not help us understand things from a customer's point of view and they rarely give the impression of caring (even when we do passionately care).

Patients notice how health professionals ask questions as this quote (regarding a hospital consultant) from a lay person I interviewed recently illustrates: "He is a very understanding man. He wants to know the answers, he needs the answers and he goes in depth, but his manner is excellent, he

encourages you to respond you know, and he brings out the best, in other words. He knows the right questions and his person-to-person manner is very good."

This may be typical of customers who view us, at our best, as not necessarily wanting to understand them better but "knowing the right questions to ask".

Ask About Medicines Week, of course, puts the boot on the other foot. Let us consider the issue of how best to answer our customers' questions. An initial customer question might be fairly short and specific, but we usually need some context to help us frame an appropriate response. Let us suppose, for example, that a customer asks: "Does paroxetine have any side effects?" The simplest answer is: "Yes." To which you might add: "But so do all medicines, and it depends on the individual."

For top marks you might also seek out a list of common side effects and their incidence. However, suppose your first response is another question: "Why do you ask?"

The customer might reply in a number of ways:

"I've found these tablets in my husband's wardrobe and he's acting a bit strangely."

"I've just started taking these and I have a really bad headache."

"I've just been prescribed these and I'm not sure that I want to take them."

THE KEY IS UNDERSTANDING

In each case a different answer is appropriate, which might include some or all of the scientific details. The key to pharmacist and customer satisfaction is understanding why the customer needs or wants the information and tailoring an appropriate response. Customers rarely ask questions for their own sake; there is usually a particular reason and a unique situation. This is why internet searching can be frustrating, but chat rooms and news groups that offer "real" experience are popular. A good customer-pharmacist relationship is mutually rewarding because (i) the pharmacist can help the customer understand freely available raw information and apply it confidently to their own situation and (ii) the pharmacist learns something about the customer and pharmacy in the process.

Giving a good answer that is appropriate for the individual customer, at that particular time and in that particular place, is more difficult than providing the standard "correct" answer. In any case, pharmacists have three main sources of information: scientific data from papers and books, their own training and practical experience, and customers themselves.

The main difficulties in synthesising an appropriate answer are understanding customers' demands, needs and values, time, access to scientific data and understanding the validity of personal experience

A practical solution to these problems may be to ask customers a few more questions before you answer theirs, and "Why do you ask?" is one way to start a more meaningful dialogue, although we can hardly blame customers for following the bad examples we often set them and assuming we only have time for a short, sharp answer.

Another useful question is "What do you know already?", which might elicit:

"Nothing, that's why I'm asking you."

"What I've read in the patient information leaflet — will I get all these problems?"

"What my friend told me."

"I've accessed the company's US web site, but I'm still not sure about some things."

The customer's prior knowledge is an excellent aid to giving an appropriate answer. You also guard against wasting time providing unnecessary information. In a busy working environment you might also ask "Is it urgent?" or "When would you like an answer?". This encourages the customer to think about it and can allow more time to produce a good answer. You may, for example, choose to:

- Do your own web-searching
- Speak to a colleague
- Telephone a medicines information department (NHS or commercial)

Community pharmacy in particular is highly demand-led (and sometimes professionally isolated) and it is easy to assume that the customer needs an answer (any answer) straight away. If you can negotiate some breathing space you also gain time to reflect on whether your personal experience matches the scientific data and the opinion of others.

EARNING RESPECT

The experience of being asked more questions, clarifying, negotiating and responding should be a stimulating one. Encourage your customers well and you may gain their trust or respect. Learn the lessons yourself, apply them daily and you should build valuable relationships that improve care and build business. We need above all to move away from a narrow professional agenda. When we are seen to treat customers and their problems with the respect they deserve, then customers will treat us and their medicines with the respect we have earned.

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