

PATIENT INFORMATION NEEDS PATIENTS

Mark Duman says that whether patient information is supplied before or after a prescription is received, it is quality that counts

In the past, patients have been passive recipients of medicines information. But today there is a wealth of information available (see Panels) to help patients become partners in taking, or indeed not taking, medicines.

With such a wealth of information, patients surely have more than enough resources to engage in concordance? That depends upon the quality of the information they are receiving, and it is only recently that medicines information has begun to receive the attention it deserves. Patients want their medicines information set in a context of understanding more about the condition that is being treated. They want to know what other treatment options exist including complementary and alternative therapies.

Developing good medicines information should adhere to a number of key principles, the first of which is patient involvement. Most, if not all, consumer goods undergo extensive consumer testing before hitting the market. Why should

patient information be any different? It is not a case of producing an information resource and waving it in front of a few colleagues before mass production. Involving patients has to occur throughout the process from defining what goes into the information, through prototyping and even to reviewing it after a year or so. Stop and think about what questions your patients have been asking you. Have these changed over recent years? Do the information sources that you use answer their questions?

Access to information is the next principle. Information should be available in a variety of formats for people with disabilities and for people whose first language is not English. How accessible is the information rack on your premises? How clearly signposted is it?

Information can answer patients' questions and be accessible without necessarily being understandable. A number of tools exist for appraising the quality of patient information. That most relevant to pharmacy is SPLASH (Survey of pharmacy leaflets — a self-help guide) which was developed by Health Promotion

Wales in 1996. (A new edition is planned for 2003.) Available at www.hpw.wales.gov.uk/tools/splash/index.html, SPLASH is designed to help pharmacists appraise and choose the most helpful information leaflets to use in their pharmacy. The SPLASH test assesses the key points that ensure a leaflet "works", keeps the reader's attention and is easily understood. It assesses the content of leaflets, how they are written and how well they have been designed and illustrated. Organisations that appraise patient information include the Centre for Health Information Quality (www.chiq.org/ chiq) which has developed the "Hi Quality" tool (www.hiquality.org.uk) Those who attain CHIQ's appropriate level of quality can be awarded the "Triangle mark" and work is afoot to apply this scheme to information throughout the NHS. Another appraisal organisation is the Plain English Campaign, which awards the "Crystal mark" for well written information.

It's important to stress that information is a complement to, not a substitute for, verbal communication with health care professionals. Information should contain contact details of relevant organisations, such as local self-help groups and pharmacies. This enables patients to discuss their concerns with additional parties and obtain all important second opinions.

So next time one of your patients asks for information, you can tell them where to go.

Mark Duman is a pharmacist and freelance communications consultant

Sources of information

ENCYCLOPAEDIAS

- 'British Medical Association's concise guide to medicines and drugs', Dorling Kindersley, June 2001
- 'A-Z of medicinal drugs', Oxford University Press, October 2003
- 'Medicines: a guide for everybody', Penguin Books, August 2003

LEAFLETS

- The Doctor Patient Partnership (DPP) produces a range of leaflets, some service-based, some more medical (Tavistock House, Tavistock Square, London WC1 9J, tel 020 7383 6803, www.dpp.org.uk)
- PharmacyHealthLink produces a range of information leaflets mainly on health promotion topics (Royal Pharmaceutical Society, 1 Lambeth High Street, London SE1 7JN, tel 020 7572 2265, www.rpsgb.org.uk)

TOUCH SCREEN

- Healthpoint Technologies provide health and lifestyle information for pharmacy customers through touch screen computers (Daws House, 33-35 Daws Lane, London NW7 4SD, tel 0870 011 6008, www.healthpointtech.com)
- Intouch with Health develops health information kiosks which are situated in a number of health care settings (Preston Mill Barn, Cirencester, Gloucestershire GL7 6ET, tel 01285 657516, www.intouchwithhealth.co.uk)

WEBSITES

- www.bnf.org — the electronic British National Formulary
- www.channel4.co.uk/health — information on drugs and alcohol
- www.emc.vhn.net — the electronic Medicines Compendium
- www.hsis.org — facts about health supplementation
- www.medicdirect.co.uk/med_cabinet — medicines information
- www.medicine-chest.co.uk — a directory of OTC medicines and food supplements
- www.netdoctor.co.uk/medicines/ — 3000 products reviewed
- www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk — new medicines content will be released during Ask About Medicines Week

Sources of expertise

Association of Information Officers in the Pharmaceutical Industry is the professional organisation for individuals in the industry who are involved in the provision and management of medical information (www.aiopi.org.uk)

Consumation is a consultancy specialising in health information design and improving patient information within the pharmaceutical industry (david.dickinson@consumation.com)

Consumers' Association has recently produced a wide-ranging report on the provision of information about medicines, therapies and illnesses in the UK. Available at www.which.net/campaigns/health/patinfo/index.html

Department of Health has produced a toolkit for producing patient information (www.doh.gov.uk/nhsidentity)

Plain English Campaign produces a guide to writing medical information (www.plainenglish.co.uk)

King's Fund has published 'Producing patient information: how to research, develop and produce effective information resources'. It offers a step-by-step guide to each stage of the information process (www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications).

Promoting Excellence in Consumer Medicines Information is a multidisciplinary group of people with a mission to improve consumer medicines information through lobbying activity and sharing best practice (www.pecmi.org)