

The holy grail of hypertension

It's not just what to do, but how to do it

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PHARMACISTS ARE CONSTANTLY BEING ADVISED TO GET MORE INVOLVED in the care of patients with hypertension and other chronic diseases. However, it may be difficult for many pharmacists to envision taking a greater role in the care of these patients when the scientific developments in this field can be overwhelming and confusing.

Fortunately, it is not necessary to be an expert on hypertension studies to contribute to the health of hypertensive patients. In fact, reducing cardiovascular risk in many patients is solely about blood pressure. In other words, cardiovascular protection will usually occur if blood pressure is reduced, regardless of the medication chosen. This means that if pharmacists could successfully address the real barriers to achieving blood pressure control —

detection of high blood pressure, medication nonadherence, and unhealthy lifestyles — we could substantially lower a patient's risk for future cardiovascular events.

At first glance, these barriers may seem very straightforward. We just need to tell patients to take more pills, lose weight, exercise, buy a blood pressure machine, go for blood tests, stop smoking, and eat right! Of course we will need to repeat these messages at every encounter to ensure understanding and make sure they are “following orders.” In addition, some suggest that we phone people at home to repeat these same messages. Sound reasonable?

How can we convey all these messages regularly and in a practical manner that will be well received by patients? The benefit of

regularly taking medications is sometimes hard to describe and many pharmacists are uncomfortable with initiating in-depth discussions, for fear of being perceived as paternalistic, intrusive, or greedy. Nothing spoils a day faster than being yelled at by a patient, so it's often safer to stick to discussing side effects and administration times than risk confrontation about something more personal. However, abysmal adherence rates and poor blood pressure control in Canada provide clear evidence that our current activities aren't working. It may be time to try some new approaches.

Hypertensive patients need motivation, education, follow-up, reassurance, and support. Because these issues can seem so simple and straightforward, their significance may have been downplayed. The key to solving these problems is in figuring out how to effectively prevent and deal with them on a daily basis. Individuals must determine what works best in their own environment. We all need to do a little more experimenting. ■

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Knowledge into practice

Tips for improving the care of hypertensive patients:

- **Get an opening line.** Incorporate an angle into your everyday greeting, such as “How's the blood pressure been?” This is relatively non-threatening, but may open a window of opportunity for discussion.
- **Plant the seed.** Don't try to cover everything in one discussion and don't expect to change patient behaviour after one encounter.
- **Establish a team approach.** Active communication with other health care providers can ensure consistent messaging and reinforcement of treatment goals.
- **Know blood pressure goals and make sure patients do too.** For those with home BP machines, readings should fall below 135/85 for almost all patients.
- **Don't judge!** Acknowledge the patient's position without judgment. However, make sure they are aware of the risks of continuing old habits and the benefits of change.
- **Applaud small improvements, but don't**

accept them. Too often we allow patients to rationalize their way out of attaining goals. Ten cigarettes a day is better than 30, however, it is still 10 too many.

- **Be frank about the risks.** High blood pressure is just a marker. It silently damages your heart and blood vessels, increasing your risk of a devastating stroke, cardiovascular event, or death. The choices patients make today are shaping their future.
- **Advise that side effects do not occur in the majority of patients.** Encourage reporting any side effects so they can be dealt with or addressed.
- **Ask about cost.** Be aware of opportunities for patients to save money on prescriptions. Try to be sensitive to this extremely important burden associated with chronic medication use.
- **Look for opportunities to follow up.** Phoning patients out of the blue may not always be well received. However, if an issue or side effect is being discussed, offer to contact them at a later time.

