

Oncology pharmacists find their role rewarding

Accessible to patients: Important source of drug information

BY MEGAN MARTIN, FREELANCE MARCH 27, 2010



Pharmacist Gabriel Gazzé counsels a patient at Royal Victoria Hospital's oncology pavilion.

Photograph by: MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER, THE GAZETTE, Freelance

There are few things as devastating as being diagnosed with a critical illness such as cancer.

In 2009, roughly 171,000 people embarked on that journey nationwide. The fortunate have a support system rich with loved ones and a highly specialized medical team.

Gabriel Gazzé has been a member of one such team at the Royal Victoria Hospital for 16 years. He's not a doctor or a nurse. He's a pharmacist. And although you might not realize it, he and other pharmacists in his position are often a crucial source of information and support for people undergoing cancer treatments.

"A big misconception about the profession is that pharmacists have a low profile in hospital settings," Gazzé said. "We actually play a big role in patient care, more than ever before."

In health care institutions, pharmacists work as part of a collaborative medical team alongside doctors and other medical specialists in many departments, and a field as multifaceted as oncology is no exception.

"Working in teams with other professionals and individualizing patients' treatments to this extent are new dimensions to pharmacy work," Gazzé explained. "It's not just about making the drug, it's about making sure the right patient gets the right drug at the right time; it's very complex."

In oncology practice, pharmacists are often patients' most accessible source of information about their treatments and any subsequent concerns they may have.

"Many patients have a lot of anxiety to change on top of the stress of having a horrible disease," Gazzé said. "They often have trouble coping and it's our role to help them understand what their treatment is and how they can best continue living their normal lives."

This kind of preparation is key for patients, said Lucie Surprenant, a pharmacist in oncology at St. Mary's Hospital.

"Their stress is often decreased by understanding the medications they're going to be receiving," she said. "It's very empowering because they are participating in their own care."

Oncology pharmacists have to be constantly up to date on how patients are handling their treatments, as they have to manage any side effects.

"We monitor everything so we end up having a lot of contact with the patients," Surprenant said.

"They need counselling to understand their medications so that they can recognize side effects and follow their drug regimens when they leave the hospital," Gazzé added.

Because of tight resources, other health professionals

rely on pharmacists to

provide patient support on a daily basis.

"They often send patients to the pharmacy to get explanations," Surprenant said. "We work in an interdisciplinary setting and we are often more available to patients, who understandably have a lot of questions about the medications they're receiving."

Interacting with patients so frequently can be difficult for pharmacists to manage on an emotional level.

"It comes with experience, but there is a fine line between feeling empathetic for patients and crying with them," Surprenant said. "They need us to help them deal with their situation and if you get too attached you'll be grieving all the time and you won't actually be helping them."

It's a question of personal limitations, Gazzé added.

"As an individual you have to develop defence mechanisms while maintaining compassion and empathy toward patients," he said. "It's never easy and there will always be a certain situation or patient that will get to you, but you have to be able to deal with that because it's part of your role."

Although difficult at times, the level of support oncology pharmacists provide to their patients can be very rewarding.

"The minute I started working here I fell in love with oncology," Surprenant said. "You get to make a difference in patients' lives; I would say it's almost a passion."

In addition to poignancy, advances made in oncology over the last 15 years have kept pharmacists on their toes.

"It's an extremely interesting and complex area of practice," Gazzé said. "There are so many new drugs available, not to mention the amount of studies and research protocols in Canada and elsewhere."

Staying on top of new information is one of the toughest challenges in this field, Surprenant added.

"It's a lot more complicated now," she said. "Some drugs are more potent, some have side effects that require constant monitoring and others are now taken at home; the amount of new information is enormous."

It's definitely an intellectually exciting field to work in, Gazzé added.

"You have to fully understand all of the new data and treatments in order to explain things to your patient," he said. "We know so much more about the biology of cancer now, it's very different than when I started."

A lot has changed, that's for sure, Surprenant said with a smile.

"Now we just have to somehow make time during the day to eat and go to the bathroom."

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