

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON SCHOOL OF PHARMACY STUDENT WRITING CLUB:

# Business Member Spotlight: Melissa Ngo

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**M**elissa Ngo has been an enthusiastic member of the pharmacy community since graduating from the University of Iowa in 2002. She initially began her career in long-term care as a Lead Consult Pharmacist, assuring the safety of medications amongst the elderly population. From there, she progressed to Madison to work at UW Health specialty and community pharmacies. Desiring a new challenge, she took her talents to Target Pharmacies, where she not only managed two locations, but opened the Target pharmacy in Hilldale. Eventually she moved onto the role of a pharmacy business partner through Target, overseeing districts in both Minneapolis and Madison. She returned to UW Health as a manager, overseeing multiple community pharmacy locations, 340B pharmacy programs, as well as the opioid and health literacy initiatives within the health system. “It’s not your typical residency”, Melissa stated, “but it really helped me grow, and I couldn’t be where I am without this diverse experience.”

## Day to Day

No two days look the same in Melissa’s practice. She splits her time between staffing in various UW Health community pharmacies and the HIV clinic as well as overseeing a team of pharmacists and pharmacy locations. Her experience as a manager at Target pharmacy provided her with the leadership skills to oversee both 340B pharmacy programs and the ability to play an active role in opioid initiatives at UW Health. She fosters a team focused approach, inviting all members of the pharmacy department to play a role in the opioid initiatives.

Melissa’s current passion for the opioid epidemic began after the loss of a family friend from a heroin overdose; an

experience that echoes many others who have encountered similar devastation. Seeing the impact opioids have first-hand instilled the importance of safe prescribing, ensuring patients are on the lowest effective dose, and creating avenues to help treat addiction. In a similar fashion to Melissa’s office which radiates positivity through a wall of inspirational quotes and photos of loved ones, it is no surprise she could spin an unthinkable situation into initiatives that will benefit the community for years to come.

Melissa was quick to praise each healthcare discipline who helps make the opioid initiatives possible. She shares that it takes team effort to help patients who use opioids or live with opioid dependence. She credits many providers for their expertise and activism in facilitating necessary treatment for patients. Collaborating with medical assistants, nurses, and social workers exponentially adds multi-dimensional value to their efforts. Cooperation amongst professionals is what sets UW Health apart. The community pharmacists counsel patients on safe use and risks with opioids, including safe disposal. Pharmacists then document the counseling in the patient’s electronic medical record (EMR) when prescriptions are picked up; a practice not commonly seen at other community pharmacies. This allows UW Health providers the option to see what the pharmacist and patient have discussed. The transparency in documentation allows for cohesive patient care.

## Raising the Bar

What ultimately led to the initiatives was the opioid crisis. While she was aware of the major epidemic in the United States, there were no strong workflows in place in the community pharmacy setting at UW Health. It all began as a residency project to identify at-risk patients, and with positive

feedback and quality changes, snowballed into something grander. What it came down to was having hard conversations that are often shied away from, in order to make sure patients are properly educated and receive optimal care.

As of October 7, 2019, almost all UW Health community pharmacies have drug take-back bins accessible to patients. This provides patients with the opportunity to dispose of medications safely, conveniently, and in an environmentally conscious way. Take-back bins also provide a low-pressure environment for drug disposal versus police stations which patients may be uncomfortable going into. The goal of this program is to reduce the number of unused opioids out in the community.

As a pharmacist, Melissa understands the impact patient counseling can have regarding patient safety. This has led to efforts in screening patients that should have naloxone as a safety net in the home. The goal is to approach patients with empathy to create a supportive environment where open and honest conversations can be had. “Naloxone is a big deal,” she states and passionately explains how critical it is to provide naloxone to a specific subset of the patient population. Continuous education is provided at ambulatory pharmacist staff meetings or through computer-based training to keep staff up to date on CDC guidelines for opioid use. During training, pharmacists review motivational interviewing skills to assist in approaching patients about their opioid use in non-confrontational ways. This phase of the opioid initiative is focused on making patients feel safe and willing to listen. In addition, Melissa’s team has made it a standard practice across all community sites, to document the extent of patient counseling and naloxone acceptance in the EMR. This allows the healthcare team to remain educated on the status of patient



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knowledge and showcases the impact pharmacists can have in patient care.

Many of the continued opioid initiatives have come from the Community Practice Redesign committee which consists of a group of staff pharmacists on the front line of patient care. Their role is to identify how educating the public on the opioid crisis can efficiently fit into the busy workflow. Creating strong staff buy-in, staff members can then explain from experience how the processes are feasible and productive based on the role played in the improvement process.

## Bumps in the Road

Major challenges Melissa has faced regarding opioids is making the patient not feel attacked by discussing their opioid therapy and gaining patient buy-in to taper therapy when appropriate. However, each patient is unique. Our job as providers, Melissa explains, is to “tailor our approach to our patients”, making sure we are not putting them on the defensive. It is about making sure they have the proper

what she does at UW Health and within the community can be massive. In order to make meaningful changes, implementing initiatives require more than one person. It takes time, people, and a lot of collaborative effort. Melissa expressed there is unease when creating new initiatives on both the patient and provider ends. Her goal is not to step on toes by forcing change, but instead create a collaborative team approach to address common issues together.

## Moving Forward

In the future of practice, the opioid conversation may shift towards pharmacist-led open communication. This may be accompanied with data monitoring on outreach to ensure the patients with the greatest need for these services are reached. Melissa predicts one day pharmacists will partake in a consistent training module that adequately prepares them to have difficult conversations with patients on topics such as opioid use. This is something that UW Health has implemented already,

knowledge and resources to succeed and it is important that pharmacists have the proper training to do so.

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and hopefully will take hold among the pharmacy profession as a whole.

Another possible focus is incorporating social media to reach a broader population of patients. While word of mouth is still an effective method of communication, Melissa hopes to grow the presence of their mission on Facebook as well as in the local news. It is common for patients to be prescribed a course of opioids following surgery or to treat acute pain and not need the full course of the prescription. A primary goal of the opioid initiative is removing excess drugs out of the community. Education through social media outlets can help patients identify methods to safely do this.

Continual data monitoring will allow UW Health to track if opioid initiatives are successful. Ideally, tracking trends will show a decrease in opioid doses and increasing access to naloxone within the Madison community over time. With initiatives benefiting multiple vulnerable populations in the Madison community, it is clear Melissa truly believes that you need everybody at the table to make successful change.

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