

PHARMACIST & TECHNICIAN CE:

Uncomfortable Conversations: Improving Dialogue Regarding Sexual Health

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Sexual health is an essential component of overall health, and foundational to the social and economic development of a community.¹ Sex is part of our natural biologic behavior, but it can be difficult to talk about because of cultural factors, upbringing, religion and spirituality, and social environments that shape us to believe that talking openly about sex is taboo, and therefore, private.² Sexual health can feel awkward for many pharmacists and pharmacy technicians to discuss. This discomfort might manifest as feeling flustered, stumbling over words, or simply not knowing what to say, especially when talking to patients.

Sexual and reproductive health encompasses a wide scope of topics. The list of related topics is constantly expanding, and ranges from sexual orientation and gender identity to sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unintended pregnancy, sexual dysfunction, and sexual violence. Throughout the world, sexual health care gaps are plentiful. More than 120 million couples have an unmet need for

CE FOR PHARMACISTS & TECHNICIANS

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Learning Objectives

- Describe the importance of improving sexual health dialogue with patients.
- Recognize potential opportunities to improve sexual health dialogue with patients.
- Identify actions pharmacists and pharmacy technicians can take to build patient trust during sexual health dialogue with patients.
- Recognize the importance of identifying biases and knowledge gaps regarding sexual health topics.
- Practice implementing strategies to improve sexual health dialogue with patients.

contraception annually. Globally, 376 million people become infected with new gonorrhea, syphilis, chlamydia, or trichomonas infections each year.³ Additionally, sexual assault and gender-based violence are still common.⁴ In the United States, erectile dysfunction (ED) incidence among men at age 50 is approximately 50%, increasing to as high as 70% at age 70.^{5,6}

Although sexual health has been acknowledged as an important part of

medical care, it has historically received little to no attention in health profession education. Limited training exists, and pharmacists and pharmacy technicians may be underequipped to address patient needs regarding sex and sexual health medication therapies. As the pharmacy landscape continues to grow and change, we can expect that pharmacists will participate in more sexual and reproductive health services.⁷

Pharmacists and pharmacy technicians

are at the forefront of the demand for medications related to sexual health needs. Pharmacies are a direct connection to care and can improve patient access to sexual health services. While ready access to primary care providers continues to prove challenging, pharmacists are frequently seen as the most accessible member of the health care team.⁸ As pharmacy practice grows, the role of the pharmacist and pharmacy technician continues to evolve. Pharmacists and technicians must prepare in order to possess the tools and confidence to address sexual health needs in their communities through conversation.⁹

Take a moment to reflect on the following potentially uncomfortable scenarios that could be encountered in pharmacy practice:

- A new patient walks into your pharmacy with a new prescription for Cialis® (tadalafil). How do you feel telling them to seek medical attention if they have an erection lasting longer than four hours?
- You are the pharmacist at a community hospital and call a patient to discuss the results of an STI test. You tell them they tested positive for chlamydia. Their first question is, “How did I get chlamydia?” How would you respond?
- You are a pharmacy technician speaking with a transgender patient and are unsure which gender pronoun to use. How do you go about asking the patient how they would like to be addressed?

These situations are common and are not limited to community pharmacies. Although these are just a few examples of sexual and reproductive health scenarios, the underlying goal remains the same: pharmacists and pharmacy technicians should feel comfortable and confident when addressing patient sexual health needs and concerns.

Dr. Debby Herbenick, director at the Center for Sexual Health Promotion at the Indiana University School of Public Health, has summarized well the difficulty of discussing sex.⁹ In her TED talk “Making Sex Normal,” she states, “Too many of us don’t know how to talk about sex and sexual health...as a result, relationships and health can suffer and important information doesn’t get to the people who need it.” Herbenick adds, “We need to make sure

that people, especially young people, have access to good, accurate information, and we need to promote tolerant, inclusive attitudes towards everyone regardless of their sexual preference or orientation.” She encourages talking about sex as if it is “no big deal.” In order to achieve this quality of dialogue with patients, pharmacists and pharmacy technicians must be prepared and confident.

Improving pharmacist confidence with sexual and reproductive health conversations begins with health profession training. Training workshops about sexual health provided in existing curricula have been shown to improve students’ attitudes and behavior, as well as their confidence and competency approaching the subject.¹⁰ It may be difficult to work within time constraints when designing curricula, but even brief education can provide impactful changes to student attitudes. Students who receive specific topic education regarding transgender health have shown improvement in competency in providing care and talking to patients who identify as LGBTQ, even when the topic is only briefly covered.¹¹ Further incorporation of sexual health topics into pharmacist training will improve confidence in new practitioners.

Increased pharmacist confidence and comfort with sexual health will increase patient trust. Studies have shown that low trust in providers and poor patient-provider relationships correlate with decreased patient satisfaction and poor retention in care.^{12,13} New patients in particular are more vulnerable to developing mistrust in providers. For example, patients living with HIV who were establishing care have reported significant anxiety about their HIV status and building a relationship with their new providers. This same hesitancy can also appear for patients who are establishing care at a new pharmacy. It is possible to avoid this onset of mistrust through actions that build patient trust and rapport. Pharmacists and technicians can:

1. Reassure the patient.
2. Remind patients that it is okay to ask questions, and encourage it!
3. Help patients interpret any lab results.
4. Avoid judgmental language and behaviors.
5. Ask the patient what their treatment goals are and find out what is important to them.

Reassure the Patient

The need for reassurance is important, particularly for patients who may not understand a new diagnosis or who may have questions about medications related to their sexual health. Pharmacists and pharmacy technicians have the power to strengthen the patient-provider relationship during potentially frightening or uncertain situations by simply providing reassurance to the patient. Even during a routine clinical visit or medication pick-up, the pharmacist can help provide a sense of security about the patient’s health.

It can be difficult to devote much time and attention to individual patients if the counter lines are long, phones are endlessly ringing, and/or there are many cars in the drive-thru. In an ideal pharmacist-patient situation, time would not be an issue. However, it is still possible to provide the patient with this same support when there is only a moment or two to talk. Sometimes something as simple as coming face-to-face with a patient can reassure patients you are available to them.

Remind Patients That it is Okay to Ask Questions

Encourage it!

Pharmacists, pharmacy technicians, and patients may feel uncomfortable discussing sexual health topics. Patients take cues from the health care provider; by normalizing sexual and reproductive health discussions, pharmacists and patients will help to remove the stigma present in these areas. Patients may not always feel comfortable bringing up their sexual health, and most patients prefer when their health care provider approaches them with the subject. Many patients want to discuss their sexual health but most do not want to bring it up on their own.^{14,15}

Pharmacies often have a large patient population. Given the sheer volume of patients coming through the door, some community pharmacists and pharmacy technicians may feel overwhelmed and that they do not have adequate time to answer questions. The approach to developing trust with patients and encouraging them to ask questions must be tailored to your specific practice site. Patients might be afraid of taking up too much of the pharmacist’s time, and do not want to feel like a burden by asking many questions. Sexual health and

medications involving sexual health can be particularly confusing, so allowing a patient the opportunity to ask questions is helpful.

Although time constraints are often a reality, it has been demonstrated that patients enjoy the opportunity to ask questions, and not just at the end of the conversation, but multiple times during the dialogue. Additionally, repeated invitations to do so increases patient comfort and trust.¹³ With sexual and reproductive health topics in particular, patients may be too embarrassed to bring up questions or to admit that they are confused. By encouraging questions, you are facilitating shared decision-making. This may improve adherence and patient satisfaction, and patients may be more likely to receive care aligned with their values and preferences.¹⁶

Offer Expertise Interpreting Lab Results

Medical appointments are often brief. Diagnoses and lab results are not always reviewed in language that matches the patient's health literacy level. Even in clinical scenarios where lab results are stable or within normal limits, being told that labs "look good" is likely not enough to provide patients reassurance. This also does not empower patients to participate in their own care. Though pharmacists may not always be involved in ordering or interpreting lab results, they should be aware that patients may have ongoing questions. Of course, not every patient will be interested in this information and not every lab result can be interpreted without knowing the full clinical picture. However, for patients who are interested and may want clarification, pharmacists have the knowledge, resources, and training to interpret many lab results. They can provide insight about a diagnosis or treatment course to help open dialogue for questions they may be too nervous to ask. Patients then leave reassured by understanding specifics regarding their lab work and learning how labs relate to them.¹³

Avoid Judgmental Language and Behaviors

Pharmacies are well positioned to improve access to sexual and reproductive health care. Pharmacists and pharmacy technicians should identify gaps in their

TABLE 1. Mindful Use of Language Examples

<i>Try This</i>	<i>Instead of</i>
Establish rapport before asking sensitive questions	
<i>I'm going to ask you a few questions about your sexual history. Before I begin, do you have any questions or concerns you'd like to discuss?</i>	<i>You should get screened for syphilis.</i>
Avoid heteronormative* and cisnormative** assumptions	
<i>Tell me about your partner or partners.</i>	<i>Do you have a girlfriend/boyfriend?</i>
<i>Hi Alex – what are your pronouns? I'll make note of them in our system.</i>	<i>I'm going to counsel Alex on his medication.</i>
Avoid judgmental language	
<i>Have you had any new partners in the past six months?</i>	<i>You're married, so you don't need STI testing, right?</i>
<i>Tell me about the strategies you use to prevent STIs.</i>	<i>You always use condoms, right?</i>
Avoid judgmental language	
<i>Do you have preferred language that you use to refer to your body?</i>	<i>Slang, non-preferred terms</i>
Don't avoid sensitive topics	
<i>This medication may cause issues with sexual function, such as decreased sexual desire or erection problems.</i>	<i>This medication has a few uncommon side effects that you can read about in this paperwork.</i>
Use ubiquity statements	
<i>Lots of my patients have questions about sexual side effects – I'm happy to go into more detail with you on this.</i>	<i>You don't need to worry about that.</i>
<small>*Heteronormative refers to the assumption of opposite-sex attraction as the default sexuality. **Cisnormative refers to the assumption that people identify as the sex they were assigned at birth.</small>	

own knowledge and take steps to fill in these gaps. Pharmacy staff can work to foster a welcoming and inclusive environment once these gaps are filled, despite known practice setting challenges and limitations.

Pharmacists and pharmacy technicians should identify their own biases with various patient populations and topics. If health care providers are uncomfortable talking about sex and sexuality, their patients will be also. Pharmacists and pharmacy technicians can begin by assessing their patient and what makes them most comfortable. They should avoid assumptions, by working to identify the patient's pronouns, and using neutral terms such as "partner" instead of gender-specific terms, like husband/wife. If an error is made, try not to overreact or draw attention to the error and instead rephrase the question or statement.

Patients need their health care providers to accept them for who they are and not feel judged for their identities or behaviors. To foster a trusting relationship with a patient, pharmacists and pharmacy technicians

must be supportive and learn about each patient as an individual. This will allow care to be provided to the patient in a way that best meets their needs. Pharmacists and pharmacy technicians must be mindful of the language they choose when speaking with patients. This is important when setting the stage to discuss sexual and reproductive health. Best practices are continually evolving, and we all should work to remain up to date on the most respectful and patient-centered strategies for discussing these topics.

Incorporate Shared Decision-Making

Patients are essential members of their own care teams and are interested in a two-way dialogue with their health care providers.¹³ Although most patients value their health care providers' opinions and clinical recommendations, many patients want the opportunity to weigh in on treatment decisions. It is important to ask

patients what their goals are and provide support in achieving their goals.

There are advantages and disadvantages to incorporating patients into the care team in this manner, particularly in a community pharmacy environment. Patients can visit pharmacies quickly and without an appointment, removing some access barriers. However, the scope of pharmacy practice does not always provide access to the most tests and/or treatments appropriate for the clinical scenario. There are also potential concerns with privacy; one study demonstrated high levels of patient satisfaction with clinic privacy versus lower levels of satisfaction with privacy in a pharmacy setting. Pharmacists and pharmacy technicians should be sensitive to potential patient discomfort and use private spaces when possible.¹⁷

Each patient's desire to discuss these topics will be different, as will be their preferred communication style. Therefore, each dialogue should be individualized. Some patients may prefer in-depth discussion, while others may prefer to-the-point information. Some patients may prefer printed copies of information, while others may prefer to access health care information using technology. Overcoming these potential challenges to incorporate patients into the care process will improve provider-patient dialogue and relationships, thereby improving patient comfort and clinical outcomes.

Conclusion

Sexual health dialogue can be difficult without practice. Much like medication counseling, it is important to identify and fill knowledge gaps, and practice to improve the conversational flow. Sexual and reproductive health topics often lead to patient discomfort as well. In these potentially uncomfortable scenarios, patients look to trusted experts, like pharmacists and pharmacy technicians, for reassurance. Reassurance can take many forms based on an individual patient's needs: emotional support, clinical information, motivational interviewing, and more. In order to assess the needs of each patient, pharmacists and pharmacy technicians must ensure that patients feel empowered to ask questions. Patients are often aware of time constraints present for health care workers and may not bring forward their

TABLE 2. Actions to Build Patient Trust with Example Questions and Statements

<i>Actions to build patient trust</i>	<i>Example questions and statements</i>
Remind the patient that your practice is a safe environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I want to let you know that you are in a safe space and what you tell me is confidential.</i> • <i>I encourage you to come by and ask me questions at any time.</i> • <i>We can speak more about this in the consultation room. Otherwise, I am happy to call you later to discuss this further.</i>
Provide reassurance to the patient.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I understand that this information can be overwhelming, but we are here to answer any questions you might have.</i> • <i>I encourage you to ask me questions about this. I want to make sure you have all your questions answered before you leave today.</i> • <i>If I do not know the answer, I will look into it and/or provide the resources to someone who may.</i>
Ask open-ended questions to promote dialogue.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What have you heard about this medication?</i> • <i>What are your thoughts on what we just talked about?</i> • <i>What can I do to help you better understand this medication?</i>
Offer expertise.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I have printed off additional information for you and highlighted the most important sections. Please call me with any questions you have.</i> • <i>I'd be happy to help you gain a better understanding of your lab results. I can explain the importance of the lab and the value.</i> • <i>I know that this can be confusing. Can I walk you through a few more details to help you understand this better?</i>
Consider the patient perspective.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I understand that this might be uncomfortable to talk about, but please know that I am happy to discuss this at your comfort level.</i> • <i>What method works best for you to learn the information about this new drug?</i> • <i>I understand that this information is overwhelming, but there are resources to help. Can I gather those resources for you so we can talk through them together?</i>

questions without being explicitly invited to. Pharmacists should invite questions, not only at the point of initial counseling but on an ongoing basis. They should also take opportunities to improve patients' understanding of lab results in terms individualized to their health literacy level. They should also take opportunities to improve patients' understanding of lab result in terms individualized to their health literacy level, if appropriate. This dialogue should be non-judgmental and incorporate patients into clinical-decision making.

Take a moment to reflect on these potentially uncomfortable scenarios again, and consider the following strategies:

- A new patient walks into your pharmacy with a new prescription for Cialis®. How do you feel telling them to seek medical attention if they have an erection lasting longer than four hours?
 - » Don't avoid sensitive topics – be

sure to cover this important point in the counseling process.

- » Consider the patient's perspective – this is a sensitive topic that they may prefer to discuss in a more private space such as a counseling room.
- » Provide multiple opportunities for the patient to ask questions – the patient likely has questions but may not bring them up unless given the opportunity by the pharmacist.
- You are the pharmacist at a community hospital and call a patient to discuss results of an STI test. You tell them they tested positive for chlamydia. Their first question is, "How did I get chlamydia?" How would you respond?
 - » Establish rapport before asking sensitive questions – be sure that the patient is comfortable discussing details with you before you jump

into this dialogue.

- » Avoid assumptions – choose language carefully to ensure inclusivity and avoid alienating the patient.
- » Provide reassurance – this is a potentially distressing situation for the patient and the pharmacist's reaction to this question will set the tone for the dialogue.
- You are a pharmacy technician speaking with a transgender patient and are unsure which gender pronoun to use. How do you go about asking the patient how they would like to be addressed?
 - » Avoid assumptions – respectfully ask the patient for their pronouns and document them for future interactions.
 - » Foster an inclusive environment – remind the patient that your practice is a safe space.

Scenarios like these will come up regularly across all practice environments. Pharmacists and pharmacy technicians must recognize the importance of effective and respectful sexual health dialogue with patients and identify opportunities to improve current practice. The strategies described in this article can be widely deployed across a range of topics to build trust with patients on sensitive topics.

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Assessment Questions

1. Pharmacists and pharmacy technicians may encounter potentially sensitive sexual health topics in which of the following practice settings?
 - a. Community pharmacy
 - b. Ambulatory clinic
 - c. Hospital pharmacy
 - d. All of the above
2. **True or False:** Dialogue regarding sexual health topics should be individualized to each patient.
 - a. True
 - b. False
3. Which of the following is not an action that pharmacists and pharmacy technicians could take to build patient trust in a sexual health dialogue?
 - a. Reassure the patient
 - b. Encourage questions at the beginning and throughout
 - c. Refer to another health care provider for explanation of lab results
 - d. Avoid judgmental language
4. **True or False:** Pharmacists and pharmacy technicians should rely on required company trainings to refresh their knowledge on sexual health topics.
 - a. True
 - b. False
5. Which of the following is false regarding sexual health dialogue?
 - a. Patients may not feel comfortable bringing up questions on their own
 - b. Patients are often interested in gaining deeper understanding of their lab results
 - c. It is not important to establish rapport before asking sensitive questions
 - d. Patients should participate in their care team whenever possible
6. **True or False:** Pharmacists and pharmacy technicians should avoid assumptions by using neutral terms such as "partner."
 - a. True
 - b. False
7. Which of the following is an action that pharmacists and pharmacy technicians could take to improve patient comfort in the pharmacy?
 - a. Offer to speak to patients privately—either in a consultation room or via phone call

- b. Speak loudly so others can hear what you are saying to the patient
 - c. Avoid “embarrassing” or “awkward” sexual health terms when consulting a patient about a new medication
 - d. None of the above
8. **True or False:** Sexual health training workshops in have shown to improve student’s attitudes and confidence about sex
- a. True
 - b. False
9. Did the activity meet the stated learning objectives? (if you answer no, please email sarahs@pswi.org to explain)
- a. Yes
 - b. No
10. On a scale of 1 – 10 (1-no impact; 10-strong impact), please rate how this program will impact the medication therapy management outcomes or safety of your patients.
11. On a scale of 1 – 10 (1-did not enhance; 10-greatly enhanced), please rate how this program enhanced your competence in the clinical areas covered.
12. On a scale of 1 – 10 (1-did not help; 10-great help), please rate how this program helped to build your management and leadership skills.
13. How useful was the educational material?
- a. Very useful
 - b. Somewhat useful
 - c. Not useful
14. How effective were the learning methods used for this activity?
- a. Very effective
 - b. Somewhat effective
 - c. Not effective
15. Learning assessment questions were appropriate.
- a. Yes
 - b. No
16. Were the authors free from bias?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
17. If you answered “no” to question 16, please comment (email info@pswi.org).
18. Please indicate the amount of time it took you to read the article and complete the assessment questions.

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| 3) a b c d | 12) _____ |
| 4) a b | 13) a b c |
| 5) a b c d | 14) a b c |
| 6) a b | 15) a b |
| 7) a b c d | 16) a b |
| 8) a b | 17) _____ |
| 9) a b | 18) _____ |

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Uncomfortable Conversations: Improving Dialogue
Regarding Sexual Health

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CHRISTOPHER DECKER PHARMACY SCHOLARSHIP

Chris Decker built a legacy of #difference-makers in pharmacy practice. Collaboration that Chris built between Wisconsin and Iowa, where Chris began his pharmacy career, continues with a new student pharmacist scholarship opportunity.

In tribute to his legacy and in partnership with the Iowa Pharmacy Foundation, the Wisconsin Pharmacy Foundation will present the first Christopher Decker Pharmacy Scholarship awards in 2022. Student pharmacists from Wisconsin and Iowa schools of pharmacy will be eligible to apply for the recognition program managed by the Pharmacy Society of Wisconsin (PSW).

The Christopher Decker Pharmacy Scholarship fund was established by the Decker family in memory of Chris. This will be the first scholarship program ever managed by PSW.

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