

Envisioning the Next Decade: Pharmacists at the Forefront of Prescribing Advancements and Preventative Healthcare Advocacy

Opinion Piece

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In the fast-evolving landscape of Australian healthcare, the next decade holds great promise for the professional advancements of pharmacists into transformative roles that extend beyond their current scope. In recent times, traditional avenues of medical care are grappling with immense challenges. General Practitioner (GP) offices struggle with overbooked schedules, leaving patients waiting weeks to secure an appointment. This strain is further exacerbated by diminishing bulk billing practices, making treatment less affordable for many.¹ Among others, these challenges foster a growing sense of inequity and inaccessibility, prompting patients to seek more responsive and accessible alternatives.

It is within this context that pharmacists find themselves standing at the intersection of a healthcare landscape under duress, where the traditional model no longer suffices. In this evolving narrative, pharmacists have a unique position of responsibility to bridge the widening gap in healthcare. Pharmacists, not merely as medication dispensers, emerge as educated, proactive experts of medicines. They lead the change in two main areas: expanded prescribing scope and advocacy for preventative healthcare measures. By anticipating and addressing the emerging concerns of an ailing healthcare system, pharmacists are poised to play a key role in ensuring healthcare evolves to be not only accessible but also preventative in nature. This positions pharmacists at the forefront of transformative change for Australian healthcare in the next decade.

Recent trials of Extended Practice Authorities (EPAs) have yielded remarkable success, setting a promising scene

where pharmacists' prescribing capabilities are likely to continue expanding. Until recently, Australian pharmacists were confined to prescribing over-the-counter medicines only. However, the pioneering introduction of the EPA, which allowed pharmacists to prescribe simple antibiotics for urinary tract infections (UTIs), marked a transformative change. Queensland's UTI Pharmacy Pilot (UTIPP-Q), initiated in 2020, achieved an impressive 87% success rate in resolving women's symptoms, leading to its permanent continuation.² This success quickly permeated the pharmacy world, as evidenced by Queensland's announcement during the 2023 World Pharmacists Day. Queensland's Health Minister, Shannon Fentiman, unveiled the expanded pilot program, including medicines for contraception, asthma, heart disease risk, nasal congestion, and more, with many other states to follow suit.³ This progressive step not only empowers pharmacists to play a more direct role in managing health conditions, but also advances the equity of access to medicines and medical care, ensuring timely and affordable access to medical services for all Australians.

It is important to acknowledge dissenting voices, such as Royal Australian College of General Practitioners' (RACGP) Queensland Chair Dr Bruce Willett, who deemed the decision to continue the initiative a "sham trial" and "very disappointing".² While opinions vary, proponents argue that this expansion is both necessary and safe, promoting equitable access to medicines. This ongoing expansion of pharmacy prescribing opportunities presents an exciting prospect on the horizon, likely to reverberate throughout the pharmacy world in the next decade.

Amidst a changing healthcare narrative, pharmacists are embracing a proactive role in advocating for preventative healthcare. With an already established focus on preventative measures, pharmacists recognise the critical importance of early screening and detection in halting the progression of disease. Positioned within communities, pharmacists are uniquely placed to conduct essential health risk assessments, administer vaccines, and ensure medication adherence. In recent years, the Australian government is increasingly acknowledging the pivotal role of pharmacists in identifying and addressing preventable health issues, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when pharmacists emerged as key vaccination professionals. This recognition is evident in Queensland's newest EPA, empowering pharmacists to prescribe and administer a wider range of vaccinations, including for younger patients, such as Hepatitis B, Varicella, Meningococcal B, Human Papillomavirus (HPV), Typhoid, Herpes Zoster, and Japanese Encephalitis.⁴ Further, in 2021, The Pharmacy Guild of Australia submitted proposals to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health, outlining how the role of community pharmacists can be enhanced, emphasizing preventative medicine. The proposals encompassed early screening for disease risk identification and point-of-care testing for essential health metrics such as cholesterol, HbA1c, and blood glucose.⁵ Critics, including the Australian Medical Association (AMA) Queensland's President Dr. Maria Boulton, have argued that the evolving vaccinating role of pharmacists constitutes "gambling with our children's health" and an "unjustified expansion." Boulton further characterizes the change as "thwarting of proper institutional processes designed to protect patients."⁶ However, these shifts are grounded in a response to evolving healthcare needs and recognise the potential for pharmacists to complement existing structures. This trajectory towards an enhanced role in preventative healthcare is likely to persist, representing a gradual evolution of the pharmacist's role. As pharmacists continue to diversify their roles, backed by community trust and greater accessibility, the upcoming decade promises a lasting shift towards pharmacists playing a pivotal role in preventative healthcare.

The next decade holds immense promise for unprecedented growth within the pharmacy field, as the landscape evolves towards expanded prescribing authority and increased involvement in preventative medicine. This shift not only signifies the professional development of pharmacists, but also serves as a timely solution to the challenges faced by the healthcare system. In this context, the expanded role of pharmacists will alleviate the burden on the healthcare

system, offering more timely and accessible care to patients. In this transformative decade, recognising and compensating pharmacists for their enhanced responsibilities becomes imperative. To reciprocate this commitment, it is necessary for all healthcare systems and policymakers to ensure pharmacists receive appropriate compensation which aligns with the significance of their widening role, and ensures the continuation of this positive trajectory. Such collaborative effort is important to sustain the transformative impact pharmacists are set to make within the next decade.

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