

Housekeeping in the pharmacy

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Housekeeping?

Yes, you read that correctly. But we're not talking about the housekeeping you do at home! We're going to have a look at the importance of housekeeping in the pharmacy. It's so important that the Good Pharmacy Practice (GPP) rules require the pharmacy to have a standard operating procedure on housekeeping, i.e. a document that clearly states who must do what, as well as how and when they must do it. Housekeeping is a critical part of the work of both pharmacists and pharmacy support personnel.

It's not just about making the pharmacy look good. There are two basic factors that influence housekeeping in the pharmacy – safety and productivity. There are many benefits to keeping your working environment both clean and orderly. Even the way you pack the medicines on the shelves will contribute to safety and productivity.

Efficient housekeeping in pharmacy may reduce or even prevent several incidents that can affect the health and safety of both the patient and the staff.

Cleanliness is non-negotiable

Everything from the floor upwards must be regularly cleaned. This includes counter tops, storage shelves and bins, counting trays, cash registers, telephones, computers, fridges... the list is endless. And obvious.

It may even be necessary to do this more than once a day. For example, when counting trays are used to count uncoated tablets, there are times when the tray has traces of fine powder from the tablets. Clearly the tray and the spatula that you use must be cleaned. It is particularly important when medicines that contain an allergen, e.g. some antibiotics, or a toxic substance, such as a medicine to treat cancer. The patient who takes the contaminated medicine may experience undesirable effects from it. (And by the way, never ever count tablets in your hands! And don't forget to wash your hands thoroughly too!)

Avoid slip and trip risks

It happens occasionally that a bottle of liquid medicine falls on the floor. Either you drop it, or someone knocks it off a shelf. Unless it's wiped up at once, it's possible that someone may slip on it. (Wearing the wrong shoes can also result in slips. Make sure that it doesn't happen to you.)

Tripping is most likely to happen if someone is sloppy about making sure that the aisles in the pharmacy are not an obstacle course. There should never be boxes lying unattended in areas where someone may trip over them.

A place for everything and everything in its place

When stock arrives in the pharmacy, it must be put in the correct place on the shelves. Obvious? Yes, but remember that sometimes you're busier than other times, or "someone else" may return a split pack of medicines to the wrong place.

When the time arrives for a particular product to be dispensed, it makes life so much easier if it's in the correct place. This is where our productivity comes in – it's so much easier to be more efficient when we don't waste time hunting for the product. And I'll be in a better mood and much nicer to work with!

It also reduces the possibility of taking the wrong product – if I know that product X is always the first product on the left hand side of the third shelf from the top, I may not even notice that for today only, product Y is in its place. I know I'm obliged to check and then re-check, but what if I've had a difficult day? That's how dispensing errors happen.

Clear the clutter

I'm talking to myself here. You're probably super tidy and you wouldn't dream of cluttering the space in which you work. It is a reminder, however, that you are more likely to be efficient and effective if your working area isn't full of half empty boxes that should have been returned to the shelf immediately. Your working area should also not be a storage area.

Don't forget to clear the waste bin – if it's full of paper and packaging, it is a fire risk.

Administrative tasks

Housekeeping also includes various administrative procedures that ensure that the pharmacy is effective. For example, the temperature of both the pharmacy and the refrigerator must be monitored and recorded daily. This is obviously important to ensure that thermolabile (i.e. unstable when heated) medicines are correctly stored. It also includes regular servicing of the air conditioners and the fire extinguisher.

Regular checking of expiry dates, and return of short-dated products to the supplier, will also ensure that expired medicines are not dispensed.

It's a never-ending responsibility

Just as in your home, housekeeping activities cannot be done on a hit and miss basis. It must receive regular and dedicated attention. That's a difficult one at home – usually you've just finished doing the dishes, then someone comes along and dirties them again. In a pharmacy, however, it is non-negotiable – housekeeping must be efficient and effective.