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COMMENTARY

Navigating through COVID-19 Pandemic – The Life of Clinical Pharmacists

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COVID-19 penetrated the Sarawak community with the detection of the first case in the middle of March 2020. The pandemic stirred up feelings of stress and worries among clinical pharmacists who have direct contact with patients in the wards daily. The condition got worse when more patients were tested as COVID-19 positive and got admitted. Wards converted to house suspected or confirmed COVID-19 cases. Since then, the ‘nomad’ life of clinical pharmacists begun.

Sense of uncertainty

Every day, we waited for the latest updates of ward status and moved accordingly to cover the patients lodging in other wards, which declared as ‘clean’. The ever-changing ward status, the occasional suspected cases popping up with subsequent lock-down of the wards, the challenges dealing with deployed nurses who were not familiar with the practice in other disciplines, the limited knowledge regarding the novel virus and its precautionary measures have indeed heightened the fears at the beginning. Armed with 3-ply masks, and keeping a distance away from patients if possible, we still carry out our pharmaceutical care routine, interviewing patients to get the most accurate medication history and providing medication counselling. With hospital admissions limited and some non-COVID-19 patients diverted to other hospitals to reduce ward congestion, we have no choice but to withdraw all the pharmacy trainees from the wards, keeping only the necessary human resources and focus on the main tasks: involve in doctor’s round, understand patients’ condition, identify potential medication errors etc. apart from the above mentioned.

Conflicts

Various inter- and intra-department conflicts arose during this period due to differing priorities on staff and patient safety. As a big organisation with a capacity of more than 1000 beds and many departments, various conflicting ideas generated, and great efforts, as well as strong leadership, were needed to reach a unified decision in the case of disagreement. Among interdepartmental issues that were close to our hearts include temporary closure of the pharmacy at ETD which declared as 'dirty' zone and opening of outpatient pharmacy 24 hours in return, rejection of counselling referrals for SARI/ILI patients until proven COVID negative, enhanced screening criteria and stringent sample handling procedures for TDM request for SARI/ILI/COVID cases, as well as problems with inadequate PPE stock and medications due to supplier and transportation problems during the crisis. As for intradepartmental issues, disagreements with the team-based working arrangement was the most challenging part. The decision must be well thought and balanced, thus require high tolerance, understanding and some compromise to ensure the safety of patients and staff. We learned to judge from a bigger perspective, protecting ourselves while minimising the implications toward others.

Behind the scene. Are we all-rounders?

With the emergence of the healthcare worker COVID cluster and subsequently more staff quarantined as a precaution, the Pharmacy department eventually works on a team-based basis starting 15 Apr 2020. Since then, most of the clinical pharmacists redistributed to be in the team with our inpatient colleagues to run the ward supply service. The work has been pretty much the same with the only difference is we do not get to understand the actual condition of the patients. Therefore, screening of potential medication errors could only be based on clinical experience and knowledge that we have gained throughout the years. Contacting prescribers to rectify the mistakes could be a considerable challenge, as we need to call multiple times to get them; sometimes we have no choice but to give up as they are uncontactable, and resorted to rectify the discrepancies with other doctors who were available at that time. Being involved in the team-based ward supply service for about two months was an excellent opportunity for us to understand the difficulties and challenges faced by our inpatient colleagues. Some have also been deployed to the temporary PPE store to manage the stocks without any prior experience, requiring them to learn from scratch. When one of our staff in the compounding unit tested positive and the whole team quarantined, some clinical pharmacists deployed to form a new team for galenical compounding. Various challenges, be it physically or psychologically await

us to navigate through during this pandemic, testing our bearable thresholds again and again as they are experiences deviating from our routines. The new normal is unprecedented; however, we strive to perform the best that we could behind the scene.

Back to the wards

We heaved a sigh of relief after the first wave passed. We were finally back to the wards on 10 June 2020, ever vigilant not to let our guards down. Face masks and face shields are our protective gadgets, a must to wear in our daily routine. High vigilance on the type of cases seen, we practice strict precautions with hand washing and social distancing. We just need to live with this new norm and accept that COVID-19 is surrounding us till there is a definitive treatment or vaccine one day.

What have we gained from COVID-19?

A lot of things which seemed infeasible previously have turned out to be possible. The use of information technology, especially on video conferencing manage to replace face-to-face meetings. Huge saving especially travelling costs which potentially can be diverted for more useful purposes. Besides, attempts of online knowledge sharing via webcast, webinar or online presentation have also been conducted vigorously throughout the pandemic. Developing a well-equipped information technology system in our working environment would be a significant advantage in the coming future. This crisis has created unprecedented challenges which also tested one's capability, resilience, communication, and patience in dealing with emergencies.

There are indeed more gains than losses from this COVID-19 crisis. We learn as we sail through the turbulent pandemic, hopefully, to embark undaunted and well-seasoned to face challenges and changes in the years to come.