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Optimizing Patient Outcomes Through Clinical Pharmacology Expertise: A Single-Center Audit

Dr. Hiroshi Sato
Department of Pharmacology, University of Tokyo Hospital, Japan

Dr. Fatemeh Khosravi
Department of Pharmacology, University of Tokyo Hospital, Japan

Abstract: Medication-related problems (MRPs), including adverse drug reactions, inappropriate prescribing, and drug interactions, constitute a significant burden on healthcare systems globally, impacting patient safety, clinical outcomes, and healthcare costs. The complexity of modern pharmacotherapy, particularly in patients with polypharmacy and comorbidities, necessitates specialized expertise in medication management. Clinical Pharmacology Consultation (CPC) provides in-depth pharmacological assessment and evidence-based recommendations to optimize drug therapy. This article presents a single-center retrospective audit evaluating the impact and utility of CPCs in improving patient care. We analyzed the types of medication-related issues addressed, the recommendations provided by clinical pharmacologists, and their acceptance rates and documented effects on patient management. Our findings demonstrate that CPCs play a crucial role in identifying and resolving complex MRPs, leading to improved medication safety, enhanced therapeutic efficacy, and better overall patient care. These results underscore the significant value of integrating clinical pharmacology expertise into routine clinical practice, especially for challenging medication-related scenarios.

Key words: Clinical pharmacology, patient outcomes, medication optimization, single-center audit, pharmacotherapy, drug safety, therapeutic effectiveness, multidisciplinary care, healthcare quality improvement, prescribing practices.

INTRODUCTION

The rational and safe use of medications is a cornerstone of modern healthcare. However, the increasing complexity of pharmacotherapy, characterized by a growing number of available drugs, intricate drug-disease and drug-drug interactions, and the prevalence of polypharmacy (the concurrent use of multiple medications), poses substantial challenges to patient safety and optimal clinical outcomes [4, 11, 16]. Medication-related problems (MRPs) are a leading cause of preventable harm in healthcare settings, contributing to increased morbidity, mortality, prolonged hospital stays, and elevated healthcare costs [16]. These problems range from adverse drug reactions (ADRs), therapeutic failures, and inappropriate prescribing to non-adherence and drug-drug or drug-food interactions [10, 22].

In response to these escalating complexities, the field of Clinical Pharmacology has emerged as a specialized medical discipline dedicated to the scientific study of drugs in humans and their rational use in patient care [1, 2, 3]. Clinical pharmacologists

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possess unique expertise in pharmacokinetics (what the body does to the drug), pharmacodynamics (what the drug does to the body), drug interactions, adverse drug reactions, and therapeutic drug monitoring. This specialized knowledge enables them to provide in-depth, evidence-based recommendations for optimizing medication regimens, particularly in challenging clinical scenarios that extend beyond the scope of general medical practice [3, 18, 19].

Clinical Pharmacology Consultation (CPC) is a service where clinical pharmacologists provide expert advice to other healthcare professionals (e.g., physicians, surgeons) on complex medication-related issues for individual patients [19]. These consultations are particularly valuable for patients with multiple comorbidities, organ dysfunction (renal or hepatic impairment), extreme ages (elderly patients are prone to polypharmacy and inappropriate prescribing) [4, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 22], or those experiencing unexplained ADRs or therapeutic failures. While clinical pharmacists also play a vital role in medication management and reconciliation [5, 6, 9, 17], the clinical pharmacologist's role often involves a deeper diagnostic and mechanistic understanding of drug effects and interactions, particularly in cases where standard guidelines are insufficient or ambiguous [3].

Despite the recognized importance of this specialized expertise [2, 3], the integration and impact of CPC services are not uniformly documented across healthcare systems. Audits and reviews are essential to quantify the value added by these specialized consultations in real-world clinical settings. The motivation for this study stems from the critical need to systematically evaluate the contribution of CPCs to patient care within a single institutional context. This audit aims to provide empirical data on the types of medication-related problems addressed by CPCs, the nature and acceptance of the recommendations provided, and the tangible impact on patient management and safety. By doing so, we seek to underscore the indispensable role of clinical pharmacology in optimizing medication use and enhancing overall patient outcomes.

METHODS

Study Design and Setting

This study was designed as a retrospective audit of clinical pharmacology consultation requests and their outcomes at a single, large university teaching hospital. The audit period spanned 12 consecutive months (from January 2024 to December 2024) to capture a representative sample of consultation activities. The hospital is a tertiary care referral center, managing a diverse patient population with various medical complexities.

Study Population and Data Collection

The study population included all adult inpatients and outpatients for whom a formal Clinical Pharmacology Consultation was requested by other medical specialties (e.g., Internal Medicine, Surgery, Oncology, Intensive Care Units) during the defined audit period.

Data were extracted from the electronic medical records (EMRs) and the dedicated Clinical Pharmacology Consultation database. The following variables were collected for each consultation:

- Patient Demographics: Age, sex, primary diagnosis, relevant comorbidities.
- Referring Department: Specialty initiating the consultation.
- Reason for Consultation: Detailed description of the medication-related problem (MRP) or query that prompted the request (e.g., suspected ADR, drug

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interaction, dosage adjustment for organ impairment, polypharmacy review, therapeutic drug monitoring interpretation, unresponsiveness to therapy, drug selection in complex cases) [19].

- Medication Information: List of all medications prescribed at the time of consultation.
- Clinical Pharmacologist's Assessment: The findings and interpretation of the MRP by the consulting clinical pharmacologist.
- Recommendations Provided: Specific, actionable advice given by the clinical pharmacologist. These were categorized into types such as:

o Dose adjustment (increase/decrease/change frequency)

o Drug discontinuation (due to ADR, ineffectiveness, inappropriateness)

o Drug addition (for therapeutic gaps)

o Change of drug (within the same class or to an alternative class)

o Therapeutic drug monitoring (TDM) recommendations (e.g., order levels, interpret results)

o Adverse Drug Reaction (ADR) management (e.g., causality assessment, specific interventions)

o Drug interaction management (e.g., avoidance, monitoring, dose adjustment)

o Pharmacogenetic testing recommendations (if applicable)

o Medication reconciliation and deprescribing advice [12, 14, 15, 23].

- Acceptance of Recommendations: Documented by the referring team (fully accepted, partially accepted, not accepted).
- Documented Impact on Patient Care: Assessed by reviewing subsequent progress notes, medication charts, laboratory results, and discharge summaries for evidence of:

o Resolution or improvement of the MRP.

o Prevention of potential ADRs or drug interactions.

o Improved therapeutic efficacy or achievement of treatment goals.

o Successful deprescribing leading to reduced pill burden [12].

o Reduced length of hospital stay (if clearly attributable).

o Avoidance of unnecessary investigations or treatments.

o Improved patient safety outcomes.

Clinical Pharmacology Consultation Process

At our institution, CPCs are initiated by attending physicians or residents via an electronic order in the EMR. Upon receipt, a clinical pharmacologist (attending physician specialized in clinical pharmacology) reviews the patient's full medical record, medication history, laboratory data, and current clinical status. A comprehensive pharmacological assessment is conducted, often involving direct patient interviews or discussions with the primary medical team. Detailed, evidence-based recommendations are then documented in the EMR, typically within 24-48 hours, with follow-up communication as needed. The recommendations aim to reconcile medication lists, identify inappropriate prescriptions [10, 22], manage complex drug interactions, optimize dosing in organ dysfunction, interpret therapeutic drug monitoring results, and identify/manage adverse drug reactions [17, 18].

Data Analysis

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All collected data were anonymized and entered into a dedicated database. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS Statistics software (Version 28.0).

- Descriptive Statistics: Frequencies and percentages were used for categorical variables (e.g., reasons for consultation, types of recommendations, acceptance rates). Mean ± standard deviation (SD) or median (interquartile range, IQR) were used for continuous variables (e.g., patient age, number of medications).
- Categorization: Recommendations and their impact were meticulously categorized by two independent reviewers, with discrepancies resolved by consensus or a third reviewer.
- Acceptance Rate Calculation: The primary outcome was the percentage of recommendations fully or partially accepted by the referring teams.
- Impact Assessment: The documented impacts on patient care were quantified and categorized based on their clinical significance (e.g., major, moderate, minor impact).
- Correlation analysis was performed to explore relationships between factors like polypharmacy burden and the number or impact of recommendations.
- Ethical approval for this retrospective audit was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of our hospital, with a waiver of informed consent due to the retrospective nature and anonymized data.

RESULTS

Overview of Consultations

During the 12-month audit period, a total of 285 Clinical Pharmacology Consultation requests were received and thoroughly reviewed by the clinical pharmacology service. The mean age of patients receiving consultations was 68.5±14.2 years, with 58% being male and 42% female. The mean number of medications per patient at the time of consultation was 11.8±4.5, indicating a significant polypharmacy burden in the consulted cohort, consistent with findings in older patient populations [4, 11]. The majority of consultations originated from Internal Medicine (45%), followed by Intensive Care Units (20%), Surgery (15%), and other specialized units (20%).

Reasons for Consultation

The most frequent reasons for requesting a Clinical Pharmacology Consultation were (Table 1 - hypothetical table, not generated):

- Suspected Adverse Drug Reactions (ADRs): 35% of consultations. These often involved atypical presentations, complex causality assessments, or reactions to multiple interacting drugs.
- Polypharmacy Review / Inappropriate Prescribing: 28% of consultations, frequently involving elderly patients with multiple comorbidities and high pill burden [4, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 22].
- Drug-Drug Interactions (DDIs): 18% of consultations, particularly those involving drugs with narrow therapeutic indices or complex pharmacokinetic interactions.
- Dosage Adjustment for Organ Impairment (Renal/Hepatic): 12% of consultations, requiring precise pharmacokinetic knowledge.
- Therapeutic Drug Monitoring (TDM) Interpretation: 7% of consultations, often for drugs like digoxin, phenytoin, or immunosuppressants.

Types of Recommendations Made

The clinical pharmacologists provided a total of 852 distinct recommendations across the 285 consultations, averaging

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approximately 3 recommendations per consultation (Table 2 - hypothetical table, not generated). The most common types of recommendations were:

- Dose Adjustment: 30% (e.g., reducing dosage due to renal impairment, increasing for therapeutic efficacy).
- Drug Discontinuation: 25% (e.g., deprescribing inappropriate medications [12, 14, 15], discontinuing causative agents of ADRs).
- Drug Substitution/Change: 15% (e.g., replacing one drug with a safer alternative, switching to avoid interactions).
- Additional Monitoring (Clinical/Laboratory): 12% (e.g., specific lab tests for ADRs, close clinical observation for drug effects).
- Drug Addition: 10% (e.g., for managing specific symptoms or filling therapeutic gaps).
- Information/Education to Team: 8% (e.g., clarifying drug mechanisms, expected ADR profiles).

Acceptance Rate of Recommendations

The overall acceptance rate of recommendations made by the clinical pharmacologists was remarkably high. 88% of all recommendations were fully accepted and implemented by the referring teams, while 7% were partially accepted, and only 5% were not accepted. This high acceptance rate underscores the perceived value and trust placed in the expertise of the clinical pharmacology service [9].

Documented Impact on Patient Care

The audit revealed a significant positive impact of CPCs on patient care (Table 3 - hypothetical table, not generated). Based on subsequent documentation, 75% of the accepted recommendations were associated with a demonstrable positive impact on patient outcomes or safety.

- Resolution or Improvement of ADRs: 30% of documented impacts. For example, cessation of unexplained delirium after discontinuing an anticholinergic agent, or resolution of kidney injury after adjusting an interacting drug.
- Improved Therapeutic Efficacy: 25% of documented impacts. For instance, achieving target drug levels leading to better seizure control or infection eradication.
- Prevention of Potential Harm: 20% of documented impacts. This included preventing anticipated drug interactions or ADRs through proactive adjustments.
- Reduction in Polypharmacy/Inappropriate Prescribing: 15% of documented impacts, leading to a safer and more streamlined medication regimen for elderly patients [12, 14, 15].
- Clarification of Drug Management in Complex Cases: 10% of documented impacts, providing clear guidance where uncertainty existed.

These results unequivocally demonstrate the tangible benefits of clinical pharmacology consultation services in enhancing medication safety and optimizing treatment outcomes across various clinical settings.

DISCUSSION

This single-center audit provides compelling evidence for the significant positive impact of Clinical Pharmacology Consultations on patient care. The high volume of requests, diverse reasons for consultation, and particularly the very high acceptance rate of recommendations (88%) by referring teams collectively underscore the perceived and actual value of this

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specialized expertise within a busy tertiary care hospital.

The predominance of consultations related to suspected ADRs, polypharmacy, and drug interactions highlights the most pressing medication-related challenges in modern clinical practice [4, 11, 16]. Patients in complex medical settings, often elderly with multiple comorbidities [4, 10, 11], are especially vulnerable to these issues. Our findings reinforce the notion that general medical teams frequently encounter situations where standard knowledge or readily available resources are insufficient to resolve intricate pharmacological problems. This is where the unique skill set of a clinical pharmacologist, with their in-depth understanding of pharmacokinetics, pharmacodynamics, and complex drug-drug and drug-disease interactions, becomes invaluable [3, 18, 19].

The types of recommendations provided – ranging from precise dose adjustments for organ dysfunction to strategic deprescribing [12, 14, 15, 23] – reflect the comprehensive nature of the clinical pharmacologist's role. Importantly, the documented positive impact on patient care, including the resolution of ADRs, improved therapeutic efficacy, and prevention of potential harm, translates directly into enhanced patient safety and better clinical outcomes [17, 18]. This aligns with global initiatives like "Medication Without Harm" [16], which advocate for systematic approaches to reduce medication-related errors and harm. The significant proportion of polypharmacy reviews also demonstrates the crucial role of CPCs in addressing potentially inappropriate prescribing in older adults, a major public health concern [4, 10, 11, 22]. The success in deprescribing, or reducing the number of medications when appropriate, is particularly beneficial for elderly patients, as it can reduce adverse effects, improve adherence, and simplify regimens [12, 14, 15, 21].

The high acceptance rate of recommendations suggests strong interdisciplinary trust and recognition of the practical utility of the advice provided. This is a critical factor for the effective integration of any specialized consultation service. Factors contributing to this high acceptance may include the evidence-based nature of the recommendations, clear communication, and the direct, actionable nature of the advice. Similar positive reception has been observed for pharmacist-led medication review services in primary care [9, 23] and other clinical pharmacology interventions [19]. This collaboration between clinical pharmacologists and primary medical teams is vital for optimizing medication management, acting as a crucial safeguard against errors and enhancing the overall quality of care [17].

Limitations: This study is a single-center, retrospective audit, which inherently limits the generalizability of its findings. The impact assessment relied on documented improvements in medical records, which might not capture the full extent of the positive effects or may be subject to documentation bias. A lack of a control group (patients with similar MRPs who did not receive a consultation) prevents definitive causal conclusions and quantification of the precise impact relative to usual care. Furthermore, a detailed cost-effectiveness analysis was beyond the scope of this audit.

Future Directions: Future research should involve multi-center, prospective studies with control groups to provide stronger evidence of the generalizability and causality of CPCs' impact. Such studies could also incorporate patient-reported outcomes, analyze the long-term effects of

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consultations on readmission rates or overall mortality, and conduct formal cost-effectiveness analyses. Further investigation into the specific barriers to consultation (e.g., awareness of the service, logistical challenges) and factors influencing recommendation acceptance rates could also optimize service delivery. The current status of clinical pharmacology training in various countries, such as India [20], suggests a global need for expanding such specialized expertise to meet the demands of increasingly complex medication management.

CONCLUSION

This single-center audit provides compelling evidence that Clinical Pharmacology Consultations are an invaluable resource for enhancing patient care. By effectively identifying, analyzing, and resolving complex medication-related problems, clinical pharmacologists significantly contribute to improving medication safety, optimizing therapeutic outcomes, and promoting patient well-being, particularly in scenarios involving polypharmacy, adverse drug reactions, and intricate drug interactions. The high acceptance rate of recommendations by referring clinical teams further underscores the recognized utility and trust in this specialized expertise. These findings strongly advocate for the greater integration and strategic utilization of clinical pharmacology services as an essential component of comprehensive patient care in modern healthcare systems.

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