



Emerging Mental Health Curriculum Framework for Undergraduate Health Degrees

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Introduction

Formerly known as the Society of Hospital Pharmacists of Australia (SHPA), Advanced Pharmacy Australia (AdPha) is the progressive voice of Australian pharmacists and technicians, built on 80 years of hospital innovation that puts people and patients first. AdPha supports all practitioners across hospitals, transitions of care, aged care and general practice clinics to realise their full potential. We are the peak body committed to forging stronger connections in health care by extending advanced pharmacy expertise from hospitals to everywhere medicines are used.

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's (AIHW) Mental health services in Australia report, 45.6 million mental health-related medications were dispensed in 2022–2023 with 18% of the Australian population filling a prescription for a mental health-related medication.¹ Given the prevalence of mental health conditions amongst Australians reported by the AIHW, it is clear that medications are one of, if not, the most common treatment interventions for mental health service consumers. Medications are an important treatment modality for many mental illnesses and the specialised management of them is provided by hospital pharmacists. Community pharmacists also play a crucial role in providing ongoing support for consumers managing medication and mental health conditions.

AdPha convenes a Mental Health Specialty Practice Group, comprising of over 700 members who work in mental health units and any inpatient, outpatient, ambulatory or primary care settings where consumers of any age with mental health conditions, receive pharmacy services. These members contribute to safe and appropriate prescribing of medicines such as antipsychotics, provide specialist advice to colleagues and advocate for the least restrictive treatment options that are not only evidence-based, but in line with consumer preferences.

Interventions made by pharmacists may be around facilitating choice of medications for consumers, education around cardiometabolic side effects and their management, as well as lifestyle interventions. These interventions aim to improve adherence to treatment, improve medication management and prevent medication-related hospital readmissions and suicide.

At transitions of care, hospital pharmacists liaise closely with primary care clinicians to ensure treatment plans are carried out such as titration of new medications or weaning doses of antidepressants or antipsychotics. They also ensure on going medication supply is arranged to prevent relapses or representation to emergency departments due to missed medication doses or diminished medication supply.

In consultation with AdPha's Mental Health Specialty Practice Group, we welcome the opportunity to comment on the Department of Health and Aged Care's development and implementation of a mental health curriculum framework for undergraduate health degrees.

If you have any queries or would like to discuss our submission further, please contact Jerry Yik, Head of Policy and Advocacy at jyik@adpha.au.

Importance of mental health curriculum framework for undergraduate pharmacy degrees

Mental health conditions frequently coexist with comorbidities such as cardiovascular disease, obesity, and diabetes. Therefore, it is essential that mental health subjects be incorporated into pharmacy undergraduate curricula alongside traditional physical health conditions, such as renal and cardiovascular diseases. This ensures that future pharmacists are equipped to manage the complexities of patients' overall health needs.

The National Mental Health Workforce Strategy 2022–2032² acknowledges the key role pharmacists play in providing mental health care to consumers. This specialist area of practice requires equally specialised training for pharmacists. This training ideally begins at an undergraduate level with pharmacy alongside other disease states, with students introduced to mental health conditions and both their pharmacological and non-pharmacological management.

However, the coverage of mental health content in pharmacy undergraduate programs is often inconsistent across universities and varies depending on the region in which the course is completed. For instance, in the UK, mental health topics are typically included as part of the curriculum in the undergraduate Master of Pharmacy degree³, with some universities enhancing this learning by offering placements in hospital or forensic psychiatric services. In contrast, many pharmacists may only encounter mental health pharmacy during their internship year, provided they have the opportunity to participate in a psychiatry rotation. Those completing community-based pharmacy internships, however, may have limited exposure to this vital area of practice.

Currently, to bridge this knowledge gap and to support early career development in mental health pharmacy and to ensure mental health patients receive safe, quality, and specialised mental health medication management and clinical pharmacy services, AdPha offers Resident and Registrar Training Programs (previously known as the Foundation Residency and Advanced Training Residency Programs). These are structured, formalised, supported and accredited national pharmacy training programs. The Resident Training Program equips early career pharmacists with foundation clinical skills whilst the Registrar Training Program offers a pathway for specialty development for pharmacists with three to five years of foundation hospital experience, seeking to advance their practice towards ANZCAP Registrar status. AdPha's Registrar Training Program offers a range of specialty Practice Area Pathways including a Mental Health pathway for pharmacists keen to expand their scope in this field of practice.

AdPha also produces the *Clinical Pharmacy Standards*⁴ and the *Standards of Practice for Mental Health in Pharmacy Services*⁵ which outline the entitlement of consumers with mental illness to levels of pharmacy care aligned with other key patient groups.

Activities to support implementation of mental health curriculum framework

AdPha underscores the critical need to integrate mental health education and

medication management into undergraduate pharmacy programs in Australia. Adequate knowledge of psychiatric therapeutics would be necessary in line with the advanced level of learning currently afforded to other disease states. In addition, mental health curriculums should reflect the use of medicines across consumers of all ages – this includes the use of unlicensed or off-label medicines in children and adolescents to the appropriate management of Behavioural and Psychological Symptoms of Dementia (BPSD) in older adults.

Failing to incorporate these key elements at the undergraduate level risks producing a workforce that is not adequately equipped to address the increasing mental health needs of consumers. Furthermore, this gap in education limits students' exposure to the diverse and impactful career opportunities within the field of mental health pharmacy. Early exposure to these topics will better prepare future pharmacists to manage mental health conditions effectively, ultimately enhancing both professional development and patient outcomes.

AdPha also recommends that, in addition to embedding mental health content within the curriculum, undergraduate pharmacy degrees should include mandatory placements in hospital psychiatry departments for all students. Additionally, support should be provided for clinical pharmacists currently practicing in mental health to serve as guest lecturers, sharing relevant case studies and offering real-world insights into mental health pharmacy practice. Incorporating the perspectives of mental health consumers would not only reduce stigma of mental health conditions but would further enrich students' understanding of the profound impact of mental health conditions on individuals' lives, as well as their experiences with treatment.

References

¹ Australian Government. (2024). Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Mental health prescriptions. Available at: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/mental-health/topic-areas/mental-health-prescriptions>

² Australian Government, Department of Health and Aged care. National Mental Health Workforce Strategy 2022–2032. (2023). Available at: <https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-10/national-mental-health-workforce-strategy-2022-2032.pdf>

³ The University of Manchester. (2025). Masters of Pharmacy degree course content, year 3. Available at:

<https://www.manchester.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/courses/2025/01695/mpfarm-pharmacy/course-details/#content-main>

⁴ Dooley, M., Bennett, G., Clayson-Fisher, T., Hill, C., Lam, N., Marotti, S., O'Hara, K., Potts, C., Shum, B., Tong, E., Trevillian, S., Sharp-Paul, N., Newman, S. and Mellor, Y. (2024), Advanced Pharmacy Australia Clinical Pharmacy Standards. J Pharm Pract Res, 54: 446–511. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jppr.1959>

⁵ Lowy, H., Borja, V., Bailey, S., Bjorksten, C., Kochman, A., Longworth, J., Meldrum, A., Sieff, A., Smith, L., Wisdom, A. and Mellor, Y. (2023), Advanced Pharmacy Australia Standard of practice in mental health for pharmacy services. J Pharm Pract Res, 53: 204–225. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jppr.1874>