



Dave Widen has been a pharmacist for 38 years and has served as the pharmacy representative on the Patient Safety Commission's Board of Directors since 2004.

**1. Can you talk about the things that both pharmacists and their customers need to be alert for in trying to prevent errors in filling prescriptions?**

One of the biggest challenges for many patients is that they haven't been shown how they can take responsibility for their own health care – either from lack of knowledge and time, or a sense of uncertainty about their own expertise. Patients sometimes feel “at the mercy of professionals,” but even professionals may make mistakes.

Another issue is that many people use multiple providers – perhaps an OB/GYN physician plus an internist, or an allergist or specialty dentist as well as family physician – and patients may use multiple pharmacies. When patients have prescriptions filled at multiple pharmacies, whether for reasons of convenience, cost or even privacy, they may not be taking full advantage of the opportunity to have medications checked and cross-checked by a pharmacist. The end result is that records are not all in one place (and of course, patients may forget to tell a pharmacist about other medications they're taking, like an ointment, herbal supplement, or the like – and some of these may interfere with the proper working of a prescribed drug).

The bottom line is that both pharmacists and customers need to be alert. Pharmacy customers should feel confident about questioning the pharmacy if it doesn't look right (in Oregon, every tablet is described on the label so you can check it against the appearance of what's inside).

Patients should especially ask questions about any new medications. Don't be afraid to call the pharmacy back if you think of another question after you leave. Know your own medical history and conditions and share with the pharmacist if it's related to the new prescription. Ask, “*What should I be aware of about this medicine? What side effects should I look for? What should I do if they occur?*” And be sure to ask how long you should take the medicine – and then follow those directions!

**2. What are the special challenges faced by retail pharmacies as they work to incorporate patient safety concerns in their environment?**

Many tablets look alike; labels of different products may appear to be similar and many labels are in small print. Generic products occasionally change manufacturers and the look of the prescription may then change, creating increased risk of error. Both pharmacists and customers should always check when a refill looks “different” – it could be a generic product change, but it might be a mistake.

Pharmacists also have to contend with noise and distractions inherent to a retail environment. Patients are concerned about being overheard, fearful of taking time from other consumers, or may have hearing problems. Also, pharmacies are dependent primarily on the patient and/or family for all the information that they need. Patients need to be able to communicate clearly, which is sometimes complicated by differences in language or education differences. Sometimes counseling is given to, or translated by, someone other than the patient and messages may not always get through. An informed populace with transparency to their health care providers is very important.

**3. What do you see as the advantages to pharmacies in agreeing to be part of Oregon’s voluntary reporting program for adverse events?**

Having a transparent health care system, with everyone working toward improving patient safety, is the goal. If you participate, you are benefiting your patients – by sharing information. Everybody benefits because everyone does better. If we’re going to have better health care and reduce costs, all the providers need to be on the same team – and that’s the patient’s team!