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Exploring Lived Experiences and Meaning-Making in Pharmaceutical Care Among Patients in Indonesia's Public Healthcare System

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ABSTRACT

Pharmaceutical science plays a critical role in improving patient outcomes by developing effective therapeutic strategies, yet little is understood about how individuals experience and interpret these treatments within their personal and social contexts. Despite growing attention to patient-centered care, previous research has primarily focused on clinical outcomes, leaving limited understanding of the subjective meanings patients attach to their treatment journeys. This study addresses this gap by asking: How do individuals make sense of their pharmaceutical care experiences, and what meaning do these experiences hold for their well-being? Using a phenomenological approach, the study explores the essence of patients' lived experiences and provides an in-depth understanding of their perceptions and coping mechanisms. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 12 participants and analyzed thematically using Colaizzi's phenomenological framework. To ensure methodological rigor, the seven-step Colaizzi process was strictly followed, including returning significant statements to participants for validation (member checking) and incorporating expert peer debriefing, thereby enhancing credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Four key themes emerged: emotional uncertainty during treatment, dependency on healthcare professionals, adaptive coping strategies, and evolving perceptions of quality of life. These findings reveal that patients' experiences are shaped not only by biomedical factors but also by social, emotional, and existential dimensions influencing decision-making and treatment adherence. The phenomenological approach enabled the identification of meaning structures underlying participants' narratives, offering insights beyond conventional clinical measures. These results contribute to advancing patient-centered pharmaceutical care by highlighting the importance of integrating personal narratives into therapeutic decision-making. The study also provides a foundation for future research aimed at developing holistic care models that combine clinical efficacy with a deeper understanding of patients' lived experiences.

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INTRODUCTION

Pharmaceutical science plays a central role in advancing human health by developing therapeutic strategies that improve treatment outcomes and quality of life (Alam et al., 2021; Valasek et al., 2022). In recent years, rapid progress in pharmacological research and personalized medicine has transformed patient care, yet these advancements have also introduced new challenges related to patient experiences, perceptions, and decision-making processes during treatment. As pharmaceutical interventions become increasingly complex, understanding how individuals experience and interpret these interventions has gained growing importance within healthcare research.

Globally, patients are no longer perceived as passive recipients of treatment but as active participants in their healthcare journeys (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). Their subjective experiences ranging from emotional uncertainty to trust in healthcare providers are deeply shaped by social, cultural, and personal contexts. Previous studies have highlighted that variations in communication, treatment literacy, and social support significantly influence how individuals engage with therapeutic decisions and adhere to prescribed regimens. These factors reveal the intricate relationship between pharmaceutical science, healthcare delivery, and human experience.

Despite the scientific and technological progress in drug development, there remains a limited understanding of how patients construct meaning from their treatment experiences (Laffin et al., 2023; Zaki et al., 2021). While clinical outcomes and biomedical measures are well-documented, the lived experiences behind these outcomes such as emotional struggles, coping strategies, and perceptions of quality of life are often overlooked. Exploring these experiential dimensions provides critical insights into the ways individuals navigate therapeutic processes, interact with healthcare systems, and redefine their well-being within broader social and cultural contexts.

A phenomenological approach is therefore essential for deepening the understanding of these personal narratives and uncovering the meanings embedded in patients' lived experiences (Gallacher et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2022). By focusing on participants' subjective perspectives, this study seeks to move beyond conventional biomedical frameworks and provide a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Such an approach aligns with the growing recognition of patient-centered care in pharmaceutical science and underscores the importance of integrating human experiences into clinical decision-making and healthcare policy.

Building on the increasing recognition of patient-centered approaches in pharmaceutical science, research focusing on patients' lived experiences has become an essential area of inquiry (Sharma et al., 2023; Yousef et al., 2025). Recent studies have emphasized that understanding the subjective meanings patients attach to their treatment experiences provides critical insights that cannot be captured through biomedical data alone. The personal interpretations of treatment, coping strategies, and evolving perceptions of quality of life are strongly influenced by social, cultural, and psychological contexts, making phenomenology an increasingly valuable approach within this domain.

However, significant methodological challenges remain in exploring these experiential dimensions (Huffman et al., 2023; Ladha & Terefe, 2025). Conventional quantitative approaches tend to prioritize measurable outcomes such as drug efficacy, adherence rates, or biomarker responses, while often neglecting the complex, nuanced, and personal meanings underlying these results. Such reductionist tendencies risk oversimplifying patients' realities and limiting the depth of understanding required to improve care practices.

Furthermore, previous studies using structured survey-based methods have struggled to capture the fluid, context-dependent nature of subjective experiences. These methods typically rely on pre-defined variables and categories, restricting participants from articulating their personal interpretations and emotions freely. As a result, many existing findings fail to reveal the core essence of patients' lived experiences, leaving a gap in understanding how individuals navigate treatment decisions, adapt psychologically, and reconstruct their sense of well-being in the face of pharmaceutical interventions.

These limitations highlight the necessity of adopting a phenomenological approach to investigate patients' subjective perspectives more deeply (Mukhlis, 2025b; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). By centering on participants' own narratives, phenomenology enables the discovery of meaning structures embedded within personal experiences insights that are critical for refining therapeutic strategies, enhancing patient engagement, and improving the quality of pharmaceutical care.

While previous research in pharmaceutical science has primarily relied on practical, outcome-driven approaches such as measuring drug efficacy, treatment adherence, and biomedical indicators, these conventional methods provide only a partial understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Depasquale et al., 2024; Hafeez et al., 2025). Quantitative measures and structured assessment tools are effective for evaluating clinical outcomes but are limited in capturing the subjective, lived experiences of patients undergoing pharmaceutical interventions. As a result, much of the existing literature focuses on “what” happens in treatment rather than “how” patients experience it or “what meaning” these experiences hold for them.

Furthermore, existing studies often employ predefined variables and fixed constructs, restricting participants’ ability to express their personal interpretations, emotional struggles, and coping strategies in their own words (Alkaissi et al., 2022; Khudair et al., 2021). This limitation creates a knowledge gap regarding how patients perceive, make sense of, and respond to their treatment journeys within broader social and cultural contexts. Without addressing these subjective dimensions, clinical practices risk overlooking the deeper psychological and existential challenges patients face when navigating complex therapeutic decisions.

To address this gap, a phenomenological approach is proposed as an alternative research paradigm that allows for a holistic exploration of meaning embedded in patients’ narratives (Elbadawi et al., 2021; Jaini et al., 2020). By focusing on the essence of lived experiences, phenomenology provides unique insights into how individuals interpret their circumstances, manage uncertainty, and redefine their well-being throughout the treatment process. Such an approach not only complements existing clinical findings but also informs the development of more patient-centered pharmaceutical care strategies aligned with real-world experiences.

Recent studies have explored patients’ experiences in pharmaceutical care, highlighting the role of social, cultural, and emotional contexts in shaping treatment perceptions. While existing literature offers valuable insights into clinical outcomes, it often overlooks the personal meaning-making processes that influence patients’ decisions and coping strategies. Several qualitative studies have attempted to address this, but many still rely on structured frameworks that limit participants’ voices. This highlights the need for research that focuses on uncovering authentic, unfiltered narratives from participants. Phenomenology provides a suitable foundation to achieve this goal, allowing researchers to investigate the phenomenon from the perspective of those who experience it.

This study applies a phenomenological approach to explore how individuals understand, interpret, and respond to their treatment experiences (Zribi et al., 2020). The method was chosen to answer the limitations identified in the Knowledge Gap, focusing on the essence of lived experiences rather than predefined categories or variables. By capturing participants’ perspectives directly, this study aims to reveal how personal, social, and emotional dimensions interact within the treatment process. The approach provides rich insights into patients’ narratives while complementing existing biomedical knowledge. Through this lens, the study addresses both clinical practice and the human dimensions of pharmaceutical care.

This article is structured to guide readers through a logical exploration of the phenomenon. The introduction presents the context of pharmaceutical care and the significance of investigating subjective experiences (Tirivangani et al., 2021). The Methods section details the phenomenological approach, including participant selection, data collection, and thematic analysis. The Results section presents findings organized around emergent themes, supported by direct quotations from participants. Finally, the Discussion interprets these findings within theoretical and practical frameworks, followed by a concise conclusion summarizing key contributions.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted a phenomenological research design to explore and understand the essence of participants’ lived experiences regarding the phenomenon under investigation (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Migdal, 2018). Phenomenology was selected because it focuses on revealing the meanings embedded in subjective experiences and enables a deeper understanding of how individuals perceive, interpret, and construct reality in specific contexts.

A descriptive phenomenological approach based on Husserlian philosophy was applied, emphasizing the identification of the essential structures of participants’ experiences while maintaining a conscious effort to bracket pre-existing assumptions. This approach allowed the investigation to remain closely aligned with participants' narratives and to uncover the core meanings that emerged from their accounts.

Participants

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy, ensuring the inclusion of individuals who possessed rich and relevant experiences related to the phenomenon being explored. Eligibility criteria included:

- Adults aged 18 years or older;
- Having direct personal experience with the studied phenomenon;
- Willingness to share personal reflections and participate in in-depth interviews.

Exclusion criteria involved individuals with cognitive impairments or those unable to provide informed consent.

A total of 12 participants were included in the study, representing a diverse demographic composition regarding age, gender, and treatment backgrounds. The average age was 42.3 years (range: 27–61), with 7 females and 5 males. This demographic variation enriched the dataset by incorporating multiple perspectives relevant to the phenomenon.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews designed to facilitate rich, reflective descriptions of participants' experiences (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Lutz & Knox, 2014). An interview guide was developed to ensure consistency while allowing flexibility to probe emerging themes. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in a quiet and private setting to ensure participant comfort and openness.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Field notes were taken to capture contextual observations and non-verbal expressions. All interviews were transcribed verbatim shortly after completion to maintain data accuracy.

To ensure the reliability and authenticity of participants' accounts, techniques such as member checking were incorporated, allowing participants to review their transcripts and clarify ambiguities.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a thematic phenomenological approach, guided by Colaizzi's seven-step method (McNabb, 2015). This systematic process involved:

1. Familiarization Reading all transcripts repeatedly to achieve an in-depth understanding of the data.
2. Extraction of Significant Statements Identifying phrases or sentences directly related to the phenomenon.
3. Formulation of Meanings Interpreting the essence of participants' statements while remaining close to their original intent.
4. Clustering into Themes Organizing meanings into coherent clusters that represented broader thematic patterns.
5. Developing an Exhaustive Description Integrating all thematic findings into a comprehensive narrative of the phenomenon.
6. Fundamental Structure Identification Distilling the essential meaning that underpins participants' shared experiences.
7. Validation Returning findings to participants for feedback and confirmation.

NVivo 14 software was utilized to manage and organize the data, facilitating the systematic coding process without influencing interpretive decisions.

RESULTS

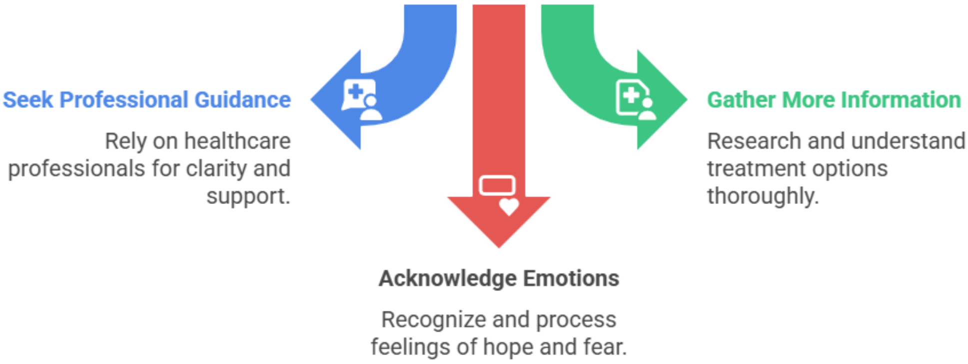
Navigating Emotional Uncertainty During Treatment

Participants consistently described their initial encounters with the therapeutic process as emotionally overwhelming and uncertain. Many expressed feeling “caught between hope and fear” when receiving treatment recommendations and attempting to understand the potential risks and benefits.

“I felt like everything was happening too fast. There were so many decisions to make, but I didn’t feel I had enough information to choose what was best for me.” (P3)

This uncertainty was amplified by limited prior knowledge and conflicting sources of information. Participants reported relying heavily on healthcare professionals for guidance, yet still struggled to internalize the complexity of treatment-related risks.

How to navigate emotional uncertainty during treatment?



Trust and Dependency on Healthcare Professionals

A strong sense of dependency on healthcare professionals emerged as another dominant theme. Participants emphasized that trust in their physicians and pharmacists played a crucial role in shaping their attitudes, coping strategies, and treatment adherence.

“When the pharmacist explained the medication clearly, I felt calmer and more confident to continue the treatment.” (P7)

However, some participants expressed frustration when they perceived inadequate communication, leading to heightened anxiety and confusion about their options. This variability highlighted the importance of personalized and empathetic interactions in pharmaceutical care.

Coping Mechanisms and Meaning-Making

Participants described adopting various coping strategies to manage the psychological and physical challenges of their condition and treatment. These strategies ranged from seeking social support from family and peers to exploring alternative therapies alongside prescribed medications.

“Talking to others who are going through the same thing helped me a lot. It made me realize I wasn’t alone.” (P5)

Interestingly, several participants framed their journey as a transformative experience, using meaning-making to regain a sense of control and acceptance. This deeper interpretation revealed the role of personal values, spirituality, and resilience in navigating the treatment process.

Redefining Quality of Life

A recurring theme across narratives was the evolving perception of quality of life. Initially, participants equated quality of life with physical recovery, but over time, their focus shifted toward maintaining emotional stability, social relationships, and independence.

"I used to think being healthy meant being free from illness, but now it's more about being able to enjoy small moments without constant fear." (P9)

This shift demonstrates a complex interplay between physical health, psychological well-being, and social connectedness, suggesting that pharmaceutical care must adopt a more holistic, patient-centered perspective.

DISCUSSION

Summary of the Main Findings

This study revealed four interrelated themes that describe participants' lived experiences within the pharmaceutical care context (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023; Mukhlis et al., 2024): emotional uncertainty, dependency on healthcare professionals, adaptive coping mechanisms, and shifting perceptions of quality of life. These findings directly address the central research question by uncovering the meaning structures embedded in participants' narratives, providing insights into how individuals interpret, adapt to, and redefine their treatment journeys.

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The findings contribute a nuanced understanding of the subjective dimensions of pharmaceutical care, answering the core question raised in the introduction (Boardman & Counsell, 2020): how do individuals experience and make sense of pharmaceutical interventions within their social and personal contexts? Participants' narratives revealed that treatment experiences cannot be fully understood through biomedical indicators alone but must also consider emotional, social, and existential layers influencing patients' decisions and coping strategies.

By highlighting participants' meaning-making processes, the study offers a unique contribution to pharmaceutical science: it demonstrates that effective care requires recognizing patients not only as biological entities but also as active agents whose interpretations shape their therapeutic engagement. This insight broadens the scope of patient-centered care by emphasizing the value of personal narratives in designing interventions, improving communication, and fostering collaborative decision-making between patients and healthcare providers.

Relationship with Previous Literature and Theoretical Frameworks

The findings resonate with previous research emphasizing the importance of subjective experiences in healthcare decision-making (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). For example, prior qualitative studies have reported that patients' trust in healthcare providers strongly influences adherence and satisfaction, which aligns with the current study's second theme regarding reliance on pharmacists and physicians. Similarly, the coping strategies described by participants support earlier theoretical frameworks that link personal resilience and social support to improved treatment outcomes.

However, this study extends existing literature by providing deeper phenomenological insights into the transformative nature of treatment experiences. Unlike previous research that focuses primarily on predefined variables, this study captures the fluid, evolving meanings participants attach to their care journeys. These findings also complement patient-centered care models by demonstrating how identity, values, and personal goals interact with pharmaceutical decisions, thereby offering a more holistic perspective on health and well-being.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry significant implications for both pharmaceutical practice and broader healthcare frameworks. By highlighting the complex interplay between emotional uncertainty, trust in healthcare professionals, coping strategies, and shifting perceptions of quality of life, this study emphasizes the need for a more patient-centered model of pharmaceutical care. The phenomenological insights demonstrate that treatment adherence and patient satisfaction are influenced not solely by clinical efficacy but also by the subjective meanings patients attach to their treatment experiences.

From a social and cultural perspective, the results underscore the importance of acknowledging patients' diverse backgrounds and personal values when designing interventions. These insights are particularly relevant for healthcare providers and policymakers seeking to develop therapeutic strategies that integrate individual narratives into clinical decision-making processes. Furthermore, by revealing how patients reinterpret their sense of well-being, the study contributes to a more holistic understanding of health that extends beyond physical recovery to encompass psychological and existential dimensions.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of patients within pharmaceutical care, several limitations should be acknowledged (Saxton et al., 2019). First, the study's relatively small sample size and purposive selection of participants may limit the transferability of the findings to broader populations. Second, the research was conducted within a specific cultural and institutional context, which may influence how patients construct meaning from their treatment experiences.

Additionally, while phenomenology enables a deep exploration of participants' subjective perspectives, it inherently focuses on contextual richness rather than statistical generalization. The findings should therefore be interpreted as context-bound insights rather than universal truths. Future studies are encouraged to complement these results with diverse populations, cross-cultural comparisons, or longitudinal designs to explore evolving experiences over time.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

The current study opens several avenues for further investigation (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). First, future research could expand the scope by including larger and more diverse patient populations to examine how cultural and demographic differences shape lived experiences within pharmaceutical care. Second, integrating phenomenological insights with quantitative health outcomes could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between subjective experiences and clinical indicators.

Furthermore, future studies may explore interdisciplinary approaches that combine phenomenology with psychological, sociological, and behavioral frameworks to better understand how personal narratives influence treatment engagement and adherence. By building on these findings, subsequent research can inform the development of evidence-based, patient-centered pharmaceutical care models that are sensitive to both biomedical needs and the experiential realities of patients.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of patients within pharmaceutical care using a phenomenological approach to uncover the meanings they attach to their treatment journeys. The findings revealed four essential themes: emotional uncertainty, dependency on healthcare professionals, coping mechanisms, and redefined perceptions of quality of life. These insights address the limitations of previous studies by moving beyond biomedical indicators and highlighting the subjective dimensions influencing treatment engagement and well-being. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of patient-centered pharmaceutical care by emphasizing the integration of personal narratives into therapeutic decision-making. Unlike prior research that primarily emphasized clinical outcomes, this study offers a novel contribution by systematically applying Colaizzi's method to capture patients' existential and socio-emotional dimensions, thereby establishing a validated framework for embedding lived experiences into pharmaceutical care. This distinctive contribution not only enriches theoretical discourse on patient-centered models but also provides a practical pathway for clinicians to operationalize patient narratives in everyday care.While the findings are context-specific, they offer valuable directions for improving clinical practices and healthcare policies that prioritize patient experiences. Future research could expand this study by exploring more diverse populations and integrating phenomenological insights with quantitative measures to enhance the applicability of patient-centered care models.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to the conduct, analysis, or publication of this study.

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