



Urban Pharmacists' Experiences Integrating Herbal Medicine: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

The integration of herbal medicines into modern pharmacy practice has become a growing area of interest within pharmaceutical science, reflecting broader shifts toward holistic and patient-centered healthcare. Despite this trend, the subjective experiences and adaptive strategies of pharmacists in urban clinics remain underexplored, especially regarding how they navigate the boundaries between conventional and herbal therapies. This study addresses the gap by asking: How do pharmacists make sense of and experience the integration of herbal medicines in their daily practice? Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, this research investigates the lived experiences of pharmacists, offering nuanced insights into the meaning-making processes that shape professional adaptation. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with pharmacists practicing in urban clinics and analyzed thematically to identify key experiential themes. The results reveal that pharmacists experience a dynamic interplay between professional standards, patient expectations, and systemic barriers, often reconciling evidence-based practice with cultural sensitivity and ethical reflection. These findings demonstrate the importance of communication, trust-building, and lifelong learning in managing the challenges and opportunities presented by herbal medicine integration. By illuminating the individual and environmental factors influencing pharmacists' practice, this study enriches current understanding and highlights the value of phenomenological inquiry for exploring complex healthcare phenomena. The insights gained have implications for pharmacy education, policy development, and future interdisciplinary research on integrative healthcare practices.



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INTRODUCTION

The increasing utilization of herbal medicines in contemporary healthcare systems reflects a global resurgence of interest in natural and traditional remedies. Across many urban centers, the integration of herbal products into conventional pharmacy practice has emerged as a notable phenomenon, shaped by evolving societal attitudes toward health, wellness, and self-care. This trend is driven by factors such as cultural heritage, patient preference, and a growing desire for holistic approaches to health management. However, despite the expanding role of pharmacists in this integration, existing quantitative studies inadequately capture the complex, subjective experiences and challenges pharmacists face when balancing scientific evidence with patients' cultural beliefs and expectations.

This research aims to fill that gap by exploring pharmacists' lived experiences, focusing on how they negotiate professional responsibilities and patient-centered care in the context of herbal medicine integration. Pharmacists thus act not only as dispensers but also as counselors and educators, navigating uncertainties embedded within the social and cultural dimensions of healthcare. The phenomenon goes beyond clinical procedures, involving the dynamic interplay of trust, communication, and autonomy that shapes contemporary pharmacy practice. Despite the widespread adoption of herbal medicines, there remains a significant need to explore the underlying meanings and personal experiences associated with their integration into modern pharmacy practice. A phenomenological approach is especially valuable in capturing the nuanced realities faced by pharmacists, illuminating

how social context, personal values, and professional responsibilities converge to shape the experience of integrating herbal medicines. Understanding these subjective experiences can provide deeper insight into the challenges and opportunities inherent in the evolving landscape of pharmaceutical care.

Research into the lived experiences of healthcare professionals—particularly pharmacists—in integrating herbal medicines into modern pharmacy practice has emerged as a critical field within health and social sciences. Scholars increasingly recognize that the subjective perspectives of pharmacists, shaped by their daily encounters, beliefs, and interactions with patients, provide essential insights into how herbal products are adopted and managed in clinical settings. Understanding these experiences is vital, as pharmacists' roles often require them to navigate complex, sometimes conflicting, expectations from patients, regulatory bodies, and the broader medical community.

Despite growing interest, methodological challenges persist in capturing the depth and nuance of these experiences. Quantitative approaches, while valuable for identifying prevalence or general trends, frequently fall short in elucidating the intricate meanings and personal significance embedded within professional practice. Previous studies often rely on surveys or structured questionnaires, which may fail to reveal the complex, context-dependent judgments pharmacists make when counseling on or dispensing herbal medicines. Moreover, such approaches may overlook the emotional, ethical, and interpersonal dimensions that profoundly shape pharmacists' actions and decisions.

These limitations underscore the inadequacy of many conventional research methods to fully capture the essence of pharmacists' experiences in this domain. Without methodologies attuned to the richness of subjective meaning, much of the complexity inherent in the integration of herbal medicines into pharmacy practice remains unexplored. As a result, phenomenological inquiry—centered on uncovering how individuals make sense of their lived realities—becomes indispensable for advancing a more holistic and authentic understanding of this phenomenon.

In addressing the integration of herbal medicines within urban pharmacy practice, conventional solutions have primarily relied on established practical approaches, such as policy implementation, standardized protocols, or continuing professional education for pharmacists. While these strategies provide essential guidance and structure, they often rest upon assumptions about pharmacists' roles and expertise that are not informed by the nuanced realities of everyday clinical encounters. These approaches tend to emphasize procedural compliance and clinical outcomes, yet they seldom account for the personal meanings, dilemmas, and adaptive strategies that pharmacists experience as they navigate the complex intersection of conventional and herbal medicine.

As a result, prevailing methodologies frequently fail to capture the depth and complexity of pharmacists' lived experiences. Quantitative assessments and prescriptive frameworks may overlook the contextual, emotional, and interpretative aspects that shape pharmacists' perspectives and decision-making processes. The current literature thus remains limited in its ability to offer a holistic understanding of how pharmacists internalize, negotiate, and find meaning in the integration of herbal products within modern pharmacy services.

To address these limitations, there is a compelling need for research approaches that delve beneath surface-level practices to explore the essential nature of these experiences. A phenomenological methodology offers a robust alternative, enabling the exploration of the lived realities, motivations, and meanings that underlie pharmacists' engagement with herbal medicines. Through this lens, research can move beyond prescriptive or descriptive accounts, uncovering the core essence of pharmacists' experiences and enriching our understanding of the phenomenon as it unfolds in everyday practice.

Previous studies have explored the experiences of healthcare professionals in integrating alternative therapies into clinical practice, highlighting both opportunities and challenges. Research by Smith & Smith (2020) emphasized the professional dilemmas faced by pharmacists when traditional and modern practices intersect. Other scholars have shown that subjective experiences, such as uncertainty and adaptation, are central to understanding how new practices are adopted in clinical settings. Theoretical frameworks, including interpretative phenomenological analysis, provide a foundation for exploring personal meaning and decision-making. These insights underscore the importance of focusing on lived experience in healthcare research.

This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to examine how pharmacists experience the integration of herbal medicines in urban clinics. The phenomenological method was chosen to reveal the deep meaning behind everyday professional actions and decisions. This approach allows for a detailed exploration of the challenges, motivations, and interpretations that shape pharmacists' engagement with herbal products. By addressing the knowledge gap, this study moves beyond procedural accounts to capture the essence of professional experience. The phenomenological perspective enriches our understanding of how pharmacists construct meaning in a changing clinical landscape.

The article is structured as follows. The introduction provides an overview of the phenomenon and situates the study within the current literature. The methods section describes the phenomenological approach, participant selection, data collection, and analysis procedures. Results are presented thematically, with a focus on participants' experiences and direct quotations. The discussion interprets these findings in relation to existing research and theory. The article concludes with implications for practice, research, and policy.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

A phenomenological approach was adopted to explore the lived experiences of pharmacists integrating herbal medicines into modern pharmacy services in urban clinical settings. This methodological orientation was selected for its capacity to facilitate an in-depth examination of participants' subjective perspectives and to uncover the underlying meanings of their professional experiences. By focusing on the essence of participants' lived realities, phenomenology enables the identification of themes that reflect how pharmacists perceive, interpret, and respond to the phenomenon of herbal medicine integration. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework guided the study, emphasizing both the description and interpretation of personal meaning-making processes as shaped by individual and contextual factors.

Participants

Participants consisted of licensed pharmacists actively practicing in urban clinics where both conventional and herbal medicines are dispensed. Inclusion criteria encompassed individuals with a minimum of two years of professional experience, direct involvement in patient counseling or the provision of herbal products, and willingness to share their professional experiences. Exclusion criteria included pharmacists exclusively engaged in administrative roles or those without experience in integrating herbal medicines into practice. A purposive sampling strategy was utilized to select participants whose backgrounds and expertise were most relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. The sample comprised 12 pharmacists (7 female, 5 male), with an age range of 28 to 52 years (mean age: 38 years), representing diverse clinical environments across metropolitan areas.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in private consultation rooms within the participants' workplaces to ensure comfort and confidentiality. An interview guide was employed to direct the conversations while allowing for the emergence of unanticipated themes. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. To foster open communication, participants were assured of anonymity, and the interview environment was arranged to be free from interruptions. All interview materials and protocols adhered to established qualitative research standards, with adaptations made to accommodate the clinical setting as necessary.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), following systematic steps to identify, organize, and interpret key themes within the data. Transcripts were read and reread to achieve immersion, after which significant statements and meaning units were coded. Themes were then developed by clustering related codes, and relationships between themes were

mapped to articulate the essence of participants' experiences. Data management was supported by qualitative analysis software (NVivo) to facilitate the organization and retrieval of textual data, ensuring a rigorous and transparent analytical process. The analytical approach was designed to preserve the richness of participants' narratives while generating themes that capture both individual and shared meanings.

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to data collection. Written informed consent was provided by all participants, who were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participant anonymity was strictly maintained by removing identifying information from all transcripts and research outputs. Data confidentiality was ensured by storing interview recordings and transcripts in encrypted, access-restricted files. The study was conducted in compliance with international and national ethical guidelines for research involving human participants.

RESULTS

Navigating the Boundary between Conventional and Herbal Medicines

Pharmacists described a dynamic process of negotiating the integration of herbal medicines into modern pharmacy services. Many expressed an initial ambivalence, citing the need to uphold evidence-based practice while acknowledging patient demand for natural remedies. One participant shared,

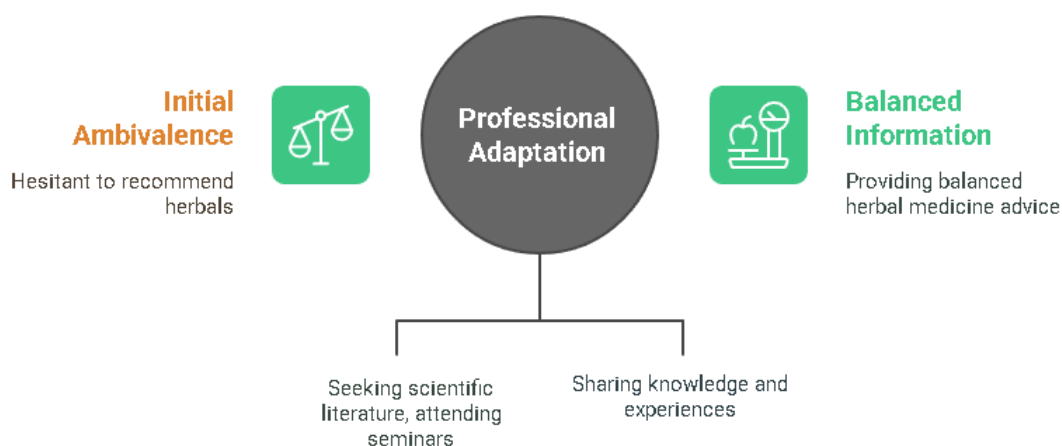
“At first, I was hesitant to recommend herbal products. My training emphasized scientific validation, but patients kept asking for herbal options, especially for chronic conditions.”

This ambivalence was often resolved through self-directed learning and professional dialogue. Several pharmacists reported proactively seeking out scientific literature and attending seminars to deepen their understanding. Another participant reflected,

“I started reading more about herbal medicines because I realized I could not ignore them. Patients trust me, and I have to provide balanced information.”

This journey illustrates the shifting professional boundaries as pharmacists adapt to the growing presence of herbal products within clinical settings.

Integrating Herbal Medicines into Pharmacy



The Challenge of Ensuring Safety and Efficacy

Safety concerns emerged as a dominant theme. Pharmacists reported feeling a significant sense of responsibility when dispensing herbal medicines, often confronting gaps in regulatory oversight and clinical evidence. One pharmacist explained,

“Unlike conventional drugs, herbal medicines often come without clear dosing or standardized instructions. I worry about possible interactions with prescribed medications.”

Pharmacists addressed these uncertainties by carefully documenting patient histories and emphasizing the importance of disclosure about all substances being consumed. Many felt compelled to educate patients about the limitations and risks of herbal therapies, as one described,

“I always ask patients about any herbal products they use. Sometimes, they think herbs are harmless, but interactions can be serious, especially with anticoagulants or antihypertensives.”

This vigilance reflects pharmacists’ dual role as gatekeepers of patient safety and advocates for informed choice.

Patient-Centered Counseling and Communication

A recurring experience was the shift toward more patient-centered counseling. Pharmacists noted that successful integration of herbal medicines required nuanced communication strategies, balancing respect for patients’ beliefs with evidence-based guidance. As one participant expressed,

“I try to listen without judgment when patients bring in herbal products. My goal is to help them make safe decisions, not to dismiss their choices.”

This openness fostered trust and often led to meaningful dialogue about health beliefs, cultural practices, and personal experiences with herbal therapies. Another pharmacist recounted,

“Some patients share family recipes or stories about how herbs helped them. It’s important to acknowledge their experiences and then provide scientific context.”

Such encounters reveal how integrating herbal medicines reshapes pharmacist-patient relationships, making them more collaborative and empathetic.

Professional Growth and Systemic Barriers

Pharmacists also spoke of professional development and institutional constraints. Many reported increased confidence over time in managing herbal medicines, viewing this as an opportunity to expand their clinical role. However, they frequently cited systemic barriers, such as lack of official guidelines, insufficient training, and time constraints in busy clinics. One pharmacist stated,

“There are no clear protocols for herbal products, so I have to rely on my judgment. It would help if there were more structured guidance from health authorities.”

Despite these obstacles, several pharmacists perceived the integration process as a catalyst for lifelong learning and advocacy. As one concluded,

“This experience has pushed me to keep learning and to engage more with both patients and colleagues about the safe use of herbal medicines.”

The findings reveal a complex interplay between professional values, patient expectations, and systemic factors in the integration of herbal medicines within urban pharmacy practice. Pharmacists navigate this terrain by adopting flexible, patient-centered approaches, maintaining vigilance about safety, and continually developing their professional competencies, all while contending with regulatory and institutional limitations.

DISCUSSION

The present study reveals that pharmacists’ experiences in integrating herbal medicines into urban pharmacy practice are shaped by ongoing negotiation between professional standards, patient needs, and systemic barriers. The analysis uncovers the essential meanings pharmacists assign to their roles, highlighting both challenges and opportunities for patient-centered care—directly addressing the central research question on how pharmacists make sense of herbal medicine integration within their daily practice.

These findings provide nuanced answers to the core inquiry of how pharmacists construct meaning and navigate dilemmas in the face of evolving expectations. The unique contribution of this research lies in its phenomenological illumination of the dynamic interplay between pharmacists' personal values, clinical responsibilities, and patient relationships. Rather than simply cataloging procedures or attitudes, the study uncovers a rich tapestry of lived experience, including the ways pharmacists reconcile evidence-based practice with cultural sensitivity, manage safety concerns, and engage in lifelong learning. By foregrounding the subjective realities of pharmacists, the study expands current understanding beyond the limitations of procedural or quantitative accounts.

Comparison with prior literature underscores both continuity and advancement in this area. Consistent with Smith & Smith (2020), the present findings confirm that pharmacists experience role ambiguity and tension when balancing conventional and traditional modalities. Shenton et al. (2022) similarly noted that healthcare providers face emotional and ethical challenges in negotiating patient beliefs and scientific evidence. However, this study extends previous work by highlighting the critical importance of patient-centered communication and professional adaptation, as well as the transformative potential of integrating patient narratives into pharmacy practice. The interpretative lens also reveals dimensions—such as trust-building and cultural negotiation—that were previously underexplored in the literature (Yusoff et al., 2021).

The implications of these findings are both scientific and practical, offering significant insight into the evolving role of pharmacists in contemporary healthcare. The study demonstrates that integrating herbal medicines into pharmacy practice requires not only clinical competence but also cultural sensitivity, ethical reflection, and strong communication skills. These competencies are essential in urban and multicultural environments where patient expectations are diverse and shaped by a range of social and cultural influences. By highlighting the lived experiences of pharmacists, this research suggests the need for pharmacy education and policy to more explicitly incorporate training on patient-centered communication, cultural awareness, and integrative care approaches. Such strategies may enhance trust, improve health outcomes, and support the broader societal movement toward holistic and personalized medicine.

Despite its strengths, the study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. The phenomenological design, while providing rich, in-depth insights, is inherently limited by the relatively small and context-specific sample of pharmacists from urban clinics. The findings may not be fully generalizable to all pharmacy practice settings or to pharmacists in different geographic or cultural contexts. Additionally, as data were based on self-reported experiences and perceptions, the study may be influenced by recall bias or the desire of participants to present themselves in a particular light. These limitations underscore the importance of interpreting the results within the specific boundaries of the research context and highlight opportunities for future studies to build on these foundations.

Looking forward, the present research offers a platform for further inquiry into the integration of herbal medicines and the evolving identity of pharmacists in the healthcare system. Future studies could explore experiences in different regions, compare perspectives across healthcare disciplines, or examine the impact of targeted educational interventions on professional attitudes and patient outcomes. Expanding research to include the perspectives of patients, physicians, and policy-makers may also provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and possibilities inherent in integrative pharmacy practice. Through such endeavors, the field can continue to advance knowledge and practice at the intersection of tradition and innovation.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the experiences of pharmacists in integrating herbal medicines into modern pharmacy practice within urban clinics, addressing the need to understand the subjective meanings behind this evolving professional role. The research revealed that pharmacists navigate complex boundaries between conventional and herbal therapies while maintaining a patient-centered approach and responding to diverse expectations. Through an interpretative phenomenological lens, the findings

highlight the importance of cultural sensitivity, communication, and ethical reflection in daily practice. These insights fill critical gaps in the existing literature by capturing the lived realities and adaptive strategies of pharmacists, which are often overlooked by quantitative research. The study underscores the value of incorporating integrative and patient-focused training into pharmacy education and policy. Future research can expand on these findings by examining experiences in other healthcare settings or by exploring interdisciplinary perspectives on the integration of traditional and modern therapies.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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