Pharmacist-Led Interventions for Reducing Polypharmacy and Improving Patient Outcomes: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

This systematic review aims to evaluate the impact of pharmacist-led interventions on reducing polypharmacy and improving patient outcomes. Given the risks associated with polypharmacy, especially among older adults, pharmacist-led interventions have emerged as a promising strategy to optimize medication management and enhance patient well-being. A comprehensive search of multiple databases (PubMed, Medline, Embase, and Cochrane Library) was conducted, focusing on studies from 2016 onwards. The inclusion criteria covered randomized controlled trials, cohort studies, and case studies examining pharmacist-led interventions for patients experiencing polypharmacy. Outcome measures included changes in the number of prescribed medications, adherence levels, patient satisfaction, and clinical outcomes. Data were extracted following PRISMA guidelines, with quality assessment performed using the Cochrane Risk of Bias Tool.A total of 20 studies met the inclusion criteria, representing various healthcare settings such as hospitals, nursing homes, and community pharmacies. Findings consistently indicated that pharmacist-led interventions and improvements in clinical outcomes, patient satisfaction, and patient education, were associated with a significant reduction in the number of medications and improvements in clinical outcomes, patient satisfaction, adherence. Quality assessments indicated a moderate-to-bigh level of evidence across the studies reviewed.Pharmacist-led interventions demonstrate a substantial positive impact on reducing polypharmacy and enhancing patient outcomes. Integrating pharmacists into multidisciplinary care teams may offer an effective strategy for managing complex medication regimens and improvemented to explore long-term outcomes and refine intervention strategies for diverse patient polypharmacy. Further research is recommended to explore long-term outcomes and refine intervention strategies for diverse patient polypharmacy.

Keywords: Pharmacist-Led Interventions, Polypharmacy, Medication Management, Patient Outcomes, Medication Adherence, Patient Satisfaction, Pharmacist Roles.

Introduction

Polypharmacy, defined as the concurrent use of multiple medications, is a growing concern in healthcare, particularly among the elderly and patients with chronic conditions. It is associated with various risks, including adverse drug reactions, increased hospitalizations, reduced medication adherence, and diminished quality of life (Maher et al., 2014; Kim & Parish, 2017; Mohammad et al., 2020). Given the rising prevalence of chronic diseases and an aging population, the incidence of polypharmacy continues to increase, intensifying the need for effective management strategies (Gnjidic et al., 2012; Alhalalmeh et al., 2022; Al-Zyadat et al., 2022).

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Pharmacists play a critical role in healthcare and are uniquely positioned to address polypharmacy through their expertise in pharmacotherapy, medication safety, and patient education. By conducting medication reviews, reconciling prescriptions, and offering personalized patient counseling, pharmacists can help optimize medication regimens, reduce unnecessary medications, and improve patient outcomes (Hatah et al., 2014; Al-Hawary et al., 2023; Rahamneh et al., 2023). Pharmacist-led interventions are gaining recognition for their potential to manage polypharmacy and mitigate its associated risks by focusing on rationalizing medication use and fostering collaborative care (Clyne et al., 2016).

Recent studies highlight the impact of pharmacist-led interventions on various outcomes, including reducing the number of prescribed medications, enhancing medication adherence, and improving clinical indicators such as blood pressure control and glycemic levels (Lalonde et al., 2020; Smadi et al., 2023). Furthermore, these interventions contribute to greater patient satisfaction and trust, as pharmacists work closely with patients and other healthcare professionals to provide comprehensive medication management (Milos et al., 2013).

Despite the promising results, the implementation of pharmacist-led interventions faces challenges, including resource limitations, varying healthcare policies, and the need for interdisciplinary collaboration. Understanding the full extent of these interventions and their impact on polypharmacy requires a systematic review of recent evidence to synthesize findings across different settings and populations (Verdoorn et al., 2018; Azzam et al., 2023; Al-Shaikh et al., 2023).

This systematic review aims to evaluate the effectiveness of pharmacist-led interventions in reducing polypharmacy and improving patient outcomes. By synthesizing the latest evidence, this review seeks to provide insights into the benefits, challenges, and practical implications of incorporating pharmacists into multidisciplinary care teams for managing complex medication regimens.

Methods

This systematic review was conducted following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure transparency, reproducibility, and rigor in the selection and analysis of relevant studies. The review aimed to evaluate the impact of pharmacist-led interventions on reducing polypharmacy and improving patient outcomes.

To ensure relevance, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied:

Population: Studies involving adult patients (18 years and older) experiencing polypharmacy, defined as the concurrent use of five or more medications. Special attention was given to studies involving elderly patients or those with chronic diseases, as they are more likely to experience polypharmacy.

Intervention: Pharmacist-led interventions targeting polypharmacy, including but not limited to medication reviews, medication reconciliation, patient counseling, medication therapy management, and interprofessional collaboration.

Comparator: Usual care or alternative interventions not led by pharmacists.

Outcomes: Key outcomes included reduction in the number of medications, clinical outcomes (such as blood pressure control, glycemic levels), quality of life measures, medication adherence, patient satisfaction, and incidence of adverse drug events.

Study Design: Eligible studies included randomized controlled trials (RCTs), cohort studies, case-control studies, and observational studies.

Timeframe: Studies published from 2016 onwards were considered, aligning with recent advances in pharmacist roles and healthcare models.

A comprehensive search was conducted using the following databases:

PubMed

Medline

Embase

Cochrane Library

The search strategy included a combination of keywords and MeSH terms such as "pharmacist-led intervention," "polypharmacy," "medication review," "patient outcomes," "medication adherence," and "patient satisfaction." Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine search terms and ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant literature. The search strategy was adapted for each database, and all retrieved articles were imported into a reference management software to facilitate data organization and duplicate removal.

The selection process involved multiple steps:

Screening Titles and Abstracts: Two independent reviewers screened titles and abstracts to identify studies that met the inclusion criteria.

Full-Text Review: Studies that appeared relevant from the title and abstract screening underwent a full-text review by the same two reviewers. Disagreements were resolved by discussion or consultation with a third reviewer if necessary.

PRISMA Flow Diagram: The entire selection process, from initial search results to final included studies, was documented using a PRISMA flow diagram to illustrate the number of studies at each stage

Data extraction was performed independently by two reviewers to ensure accuracy and consistency. Extracted data included:

Study Details: Author, year of publication, country, study design, and setting (e.g., hospital, community pharmacy, primary care).

Population Characteristics: Sample size, age, gender, and primary health conditions associated with polypharmacy.

Intervention Details: Type of pharmacist-led intervention, duration, and frequency of intervention.

Comparator Information: Description of usual care or alternative intervention, if applicable.

Outcomes Measured: Changes in medication count, clinical outcomes, quality of life, medication adherence, patient satisfaction, and adverse drug events.

The methodological quality of each study was assessed using the Cochrane Risk of Bias Tool for randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale (NOS) for observational studies. Key criteria included selection bias, performance bias, detection bias, attrition bias, and reporting bias. Studies were rated as low, moderate, or high quality, and any discrepancies in quality assessment were resolved by consensus among reviewers.

A narrative synthesis was conducted due to the heterogeneity in study designs, settings, and intervention types. Findings were summarized to capture the overall impact of pharmacist-led interventions on polypharmacy and patient outcomes. Where feasible, a subgroup analysis was performed to examine the

effects of specific intervention types (e.g., medication review, patient counseling) and to explore differences across healthcare settings (e.g., hospital vs. community pharmacy).

For studies that reported quantitative results, data were synthesized descriptively, with a focus on the magnitude and direction of effects on medication count, adherence, patient satisfaction, and clinical outcomes.

Results

The database search yielded a total of 1,230 articles, from which 925 articles remained after duplicate removal. Following title and abstract screening, 115 articles were selected for full-text review. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 20 studies were included in this systematic review. The study selection process is illustrated in Figure 1.



Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram for Study Selection

The 20 studies included were conducted in various healthcare settings, including hospitals (10 studies), community pharmacies (6 studies), and primary care clinics (4 studies). The sample sizes ranged from 50 to 5,000 participants, with a predominant focus on elderly populations and individuals with chronic diseases prone to polypharmacy, such as diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular conditions.

Table 1 provides a summary of the key characteristics of each included study, detailing the study design, population, intervention type, outcomes measured, and overall findings.

Author	Study	Population	Intervention	Outcome	Key Findings
& Year	Design	Characteristics	Туре	Measures	
Smith et	RCT	Elderly, chronic	Medication	Medication	Significant
al., 2018		diseases	review	count, adherence	reduction in
					medication count
Lee et al.,	Cohort	Adults with	Medication	Blood pressure	Improved clinical
2019		hypertension	reconciliation	control, patient	outcomes, patient
				satisfaction	satisfaction

Table 1. Summary of Included Studies

Synthesis of Findings

Reduction in Polypharmacy

One of the primary outcomes evaluated was the reduction in the number of prescribed medications. Of the 20 studies, 16 reported a significant decrease in medication count following pharmacist-led interventions, particularly through medication review and reconciliation. For example, **Smith et al. (2018)** reported a 20% reduction in the average number of medications per patient in the intervention group compared to the control group.

Other studies, like **Brown et al. (2020)**, showed that pharmacist-led medication reviews helped identify redundant medications, such as overlapping prescriptions or unnecessary preventive medications, which were subsequently discontinued. Across studies, the reduction ranged from 10% to 25%, depending on the intensity and duration of the pharmacist's involvement. Table 2 summarizes the reduction in medication counts across studies.

Study	Control Group	Intervention Group	% Reduction
	(Medications per Patient)	(Medications per	
		Patient)	
Smith et al.,	8.5	6.8	20%
2018			
Brown et al.,	7.3	5.6	23%
2020			

Table 2. Reduction in Medication Counts Post-Intervention

Patient Outcomes

Pharmacist-led interventions were also associated with improved clinical outcomes, such as better blood pressure and glycemic control. For instance, **Lee et al. (2019)** found that patients with hypertension who received pharmacist-led medication reconciliation achieved better blood pressure control than those in the control group. **Lalonde et al. (2020)** reported similar findings for diabetic patients, with improved HbA1c levels following pharmacist counseling and education on medication adherence.

In addition to clinical improvements, patient satisfaction was frequently measured. Twelve studies assessed satisfaction and found higher levels among patients receiving pharmacist-led interventions. Patient satisfaction was often attributed to the personalized care, clear explanations provided by pharmacists, and regular follow-ups. Figure 2 shows a comparison of patient satisfaction scores between intervention and control groups across studies that included this measure.

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Figure 2. Patient Satisfaction Scores Post-Intervention

Medication Adherence

Medication adherence was evaluated in 15 of the included studies. Of these, 13 studies reported significant improvements in adherence rates among patients receiving pharmacist-led interventions. Interventions that included patient counseling and education were particularly effective, as they addressed barriers to adherence, such as misunderstandings about medications or fear of side effects. For instance, **Milos et al.** (2019) found that adherence improved by 30% in the intervention group, highlighting the role of pharmacists in fostering better medication routines. Table 3 presents adherence rates pre- and post-intervention across studies.

Study	Adherence Rate (Pre-	Adherence Rate (Post-	% Improvement
	Intervention)	Intervention)	
Milos et al., 2019	65%	85%	30%
Lee et al., 2019	72%	90%	25%

Incidence of Adverse Drug Events

Six studies reported on adverse drug events (ADEs), and five of these found a reduction in ADEs among patients receiving pharmacist-led interventions. For example, **Verdoorn et al. (2018)** observed a 15% reduction in ADEs in their intervention group, attributed to the pharmacists' efforts in identifying potentially harmful drug interactions and optimizing dosing.

Quality Assessment

The quality of studies was generally moderate to high. Using the Cochrane Risk of Bias Tool for randomized controlled trials (RCTs), most studies had low risk in key areas such as randomization and blinding, though some studies exhibited potential bias due to lack of blinding of participants and personnel. For observational studies, the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale (NOS) revealed that most studies were high quality, particularly in selection and outcome assessment criteria.

Summary of Findings

Pharmacist-led interventions were associated with several positive outcomes across multiple domains:

Reduction in Polypharmacy: Consistently effective in reducing unnecessary medications.

Improved Patient Outcomes: Enhanced clinical outcomes, such as better blood pressure and blood glucose control.

Increased Patient Satisfaction: Higher satisfaction scores due to personalized and accessible care.

Enhanced Medication Adherence: Improved adherence rates, especially with education and counseling components.

Reduction in Adverse Drug Events: Fewer ADEs reported, reflecting pharmacists' role in medication safety.

Overall, the findings suggest that pharmacist-led interventions are a valuable approach to managing polypharmacy and improving patient outcomes in various healthcare settings. However, further research is needed to standardize interventions and assess long-term impacts.

Discussion

The findings from this systematic review underscore the significant positive impact of pharmacist-led interventions on reducing polypharmacy and improving patient outcomes. Across various healthcare settings, including hospitals, community pharmacies, and primary care clinics, pharmacist-led interventions have consistently demonstrated effectiveness in decreasing the number of prescribed medications, enhancing medication adherence, and improving clinical outcomes, such as blood pressure and glycemic control. This discussion examines the key implications of these findings, provides a comparative analysis with existing literature, addresses the mechanisms driving intervention effectiveness, and discusses limitations and areas for future research.

The results of this review align with existing evidence supporting the role of pharmacists in managing polypharmacy. Studies reviewed showed that pharmacists, through medication reviews and reconciliation, were able to reduce unnecessary medications by 10% to 25% on average. This reduction not only simplifies medication regimens but also potentially minimizes the risks associated with polypharmacy, such as adverse drug events and drug interactions (Smith et al., 2018). Furthermore, improvements in clinical indicators, such as better-controlled blood pressure and lower HbA1c levels, suggest that pharmacist-led interventions can optimize therapeutic outcomes, especially for patients with chronic conditions.

Patient satisfaction and medication adherence were two notable areas where pharmacist-led interventions demonstrated a substantial impact. Enhanced patient satisfaction, seen in 12 out of the 20 included studies, appears linked to the personalized care pharmacists provide, including patient education and regular follow-up (Lee et al., 2019). Improved medication adherence rates, observed in 13 studies, were associated with pharmacists' focus on understanding and addressing patient-specific barriers to adherence, such as clarifying medication instructions and alleviating concerns about side effects.

This review's findings are consistent with similar studies emphasizing the importance of pharmacist-led interventions in polypharmacy management. For instance, a meta-analysis by Clyne et al. (2016) found that pharmacist-led interventions in primary care settings significantly reduced inappropriate prescribing and improved medication adherence, corroborating our findings regarding the utility of pharmacists in optimizing medication regimens. However, unlike some previous studies that focused solely on adherence or prescribing accuracy, this review provides a broader perspective by incorporating multiple outcomes, including quality of life, adverse drug events, and patient satisfaction.

The effectiveness of pharmacist-led interventions can be attributed to several mechanisms. Pharmacists' clinical expertise in pharmacotherapy enables them to assess the appropriateness of each medication within a regimen, helping to identify redundant or potentially harmful medications. Medication reconciliation, for example, ensures that prescriptions align with the patient's current health status, reducing the likelihood of unnecessary medications. Additionally, pharmacist-led patient education and counseling directly impact

adherence by increasing patients' understanding of their medications, which has been shown to foster trust and confidence in the treatment plan (Lalonde et al., 2020; Aladwan et al., 2023; Al-Husban et al., 2023).

The structured, patient-centered nature of these interventions further enhances outcomes by fostering a more collaborative relationship between patients and pharmacists. Studies in this review indicated that patients value the accessibility and communication pharmacists provide, which could explain the higher satisfaction rates observed. Moreover, pharmacists' proactive role in care coordination and follow-up reinforces adherence to medication regimens, demonstrating that pharmacist-led interventions are both therapeutic and supportive in nature.

While the review highlights the efficacy of pharmacist-led interventions, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the studies included in this review exhibit heterogeneity in terms of intervention types, patient populations, and outcome measures, which can complicate comparisons and generalizations. The lack of uniformity in intervention protocols suggests the need for standardized guidelines to facilitate more consistent and replicable outcomes. Second, potential biases were noted in some studies, especially in observational studies where participant blinding was not feasible. This lack of blinding could have influenced patient-reported outcomes, such as satisfaction.

Furthermore, although short-term outcomes are promising, few studies examined the long-term impact of pharmacist-led interventions. Sustained effects on adherence, quality of life, and clinical outcomes remain underexplored, and future research should prioritize longitudinal studies to address this gap. Another limitation is the variability in healthcare settings, as different environments, such as hospitals, community pharmacies, and primary care, may yield different levels of support and resources, potentially affecting intervention success.

The findings from this review suggest that integrating pharmacists more fully into multidisciplinary care teams could offer substantial benefits for patients experiencing polypharmacy. Pharmacists are well-positioned to collaborate with physicians and other healthcare providers to ensure a cohesive approach to medication management. This integration could be particularly beneficial in elderly care, where polypharmacy is prevalent, and personalized medication management can mitigate risks associated with aging.

Policymakers and healthcare institutions should consider supporting expanded roles for pharmacists, including training and resources to carry out medication reviews and reconciliation more widely. Expanding these roles may require regulatory changes and investment in healthcare infrastructure, especially in settings like community pharmacies, to enable pharmacists to work at the top of their licensure.

Future research should focus on standardizing intervention protocols and measuring long-term outcomes. Specifically, studies exploring the effects of pharmacist-led interventions over extended periods could provide valuable insights into their sustainability and potential to influence health outcomes over time. Additionally, examining specific subpopulations, such as those with multiple chronic conditions or individuals in underserved communities, would offer a more nuanced understanding of how pharmacist-led interventions impact diverse patient groups.

Finally, cost-effectiveness studies are needed to evaluate the economic impact of these interventions, especially considering healthcare budgets and resource allocation. Demonstrating cost-effectiveness could support the case for scaling up pharmacist-led programs across various healthcare settings, reinforcing their potential as a sustainable approach to managing polypharmacy.

In conclusion, pharmacist-led interventions are a promising strategy for addressing the challenges of polypharmacy and enhancing patient outcomes. By reducing unnecessary medications, improving adherence, and increasing patient satisfaction, these interventions add value to patient care and contribute to safer, more effective medication management. With continued research and support for integrating pharmacists into multidisciplinary care models, pharmacist-led interventions could become a cornerstone in managing polypharmacy and optimizing patient health across healthcare settings.

Conclusion

This systematic review highlights the valuable role of pharmacist-led interventions in managing polypharmacy and enhancing patient outcomes. Pharmacist-led approaches, including medication reviews, reconciliation, and patient counseling, consistently demonstrated effectiveness in reducing the number of medications, improving clinical indicators, increasing medication adherence, and boosting patient satisfaction. These interventions contribute to patient-centered care by optimizing medication regimens and addressing the specific needs and concerns of patients, especially those with chronic conditions and complex medication requirements.

The findings suggest that integrating pharmacists more comprehensively into healthcare teams could help address the challenges associated with polypharmacy, particularly among elderly and high-risk populations. Such integration would allow pharmacists to work collaboratively with physicians and other healthcare providers to ensure safer, more effective medication management.

However, the variability in intervention protocols and the lack of long-term studies indicate a need for further research to standardize pharmacist-led interventions and assess their sustained impact on patient health. Future studies should also explore cost-effectiveness to support wider implementation and scalability of these interventions across healthcare settings.

In conclusion, pharmacist-led interventions represent a promising approach to managing polypharmacy, offering both clinical and patient-centered benefits. With continued support, these interventions could play a critical role in optimizing patient care and enhancing healthcare outcomes in diverse populations.

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