New Online Tools Guide Pharmacists Toward Effective Communication with Seniors

In recognition of American Pharmacists Month, The Gerontological Society of America (GSA) — the nation’s largest interdisciplinary organization devoted to the field of aging — has released the first of several new online training modules designed to help pharmacy professionals to meet the needs of their aging patients.

“Communicating Effectively with Older Adults — What Really Works: The Basics of Aging and Communication” is the inaugural offering in The Silver Market Community Pharmacy series, which was developed with support from McNeil Consumer Healthcare. All modules in the series, less than 25 minutes each, will offer expert information and time-tested techniques to help pharmacists and technicians work efficiently and respectfully across the counter.

At present, older adults account for one third of all prescription drug use. The U.S. Administration on Aging forecasts that nearly one in five Americans will be 65 or older by 2030. And according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, two-thirds of older adults currently are unable to understand the information given to them about their prescription medications.

Jake Harwood, PhD, a profession in the Department of Communication at the University of Arizona and an advisor on the Silver Market series, said the modules are valuable because they recognize the importance of communication across the health professions.

“There is now increasing support for effective communication between physicians and older patients, but the information for other health professionals is fairly limited,” Harwood said. “The pharmacist encounter is a critical one for dealing with issues such as problematic drug interactions that are common with older adults; finding ways to improve this encounter is therefore really important.”

In the “Basics of Aging” module, pharmacy staff will become familiar with the foundations of communicating effectively with elderly patients and avoiding condescending “senior speak.” This brief program illustrates how an understanding of pathologies of aging, such as hearing loss, short-term memory impairment, or reduced speed in processing information, can impact seniors.

Future modules will focus on communicating with older adults with mild cognitive impairment, improving face-to-face communication with older adults regarding both medication adherence and safety, and older adult diversity. The Silver Market series is based on GSA’s 2012 publication “Communicating with Older Adults: An Evidence-Based View of What Really Works,” also supported by McNeil Consumer Healthcare.

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The Gerontological Society of America (GSA) is the nation’s oldest and largest interdisciplinary organization devoted to research, education, and practice in the field of aging. The principal mission of the Society — and its 5,400+ members — is to advance the study of aging and disseminate information among scientists, decision makers, and the general public. GSA’s structure also includes a policy institute, the National Academy on an Aging Society, and an educational branch, the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education.