Pharmacists from every corner of the world have one shared goal: to better the health of those around them through the unique skills and knowledge that make them the medicines experts within healthcare circles. Dedicated to fostering the impact of pharmacists worldwide, the International Pharmaceutical Federation (FIP) brings together millions of pharmacists under one global umbrella. In this forum of knowledge exchange and growth, pharmacists are encouraged to use their accessible position within communities to make a positive impact within all areas of health, including those that affect gastrointestinal well-being.

The theme of this issue is especially relevant to pharmacists interacting with the public in community pharmacies. The title could not explain the pharmacist’s position better, as community pharmacists spend a significant amount of time guiding both regular and casual visitors to the pharmacy on how to manage the entire gamut of gastrointestinal complaints - from top to bottom, so to say. This situation is a natural and obvious outcome of the fact that pharmacists are accessible at the points of choice and sale of medicines to treat common GI maladies, and are the only health professional armed with the pharmaceutical knowledge to properly advise in such circumstances.

In a recent Continuing Education Module for pharmacists, the American Pharmacists Association (APhA) recounts statistics that indicate "7% of American adults suffer from daily heartburn, 14% experience weekly heartburn, and 44% experience monthly heartburn...More than 4 million Americans (particularly women and adults aged 65 years and older) have frequent constipation" (APhA OTC Advisor, Self-Care for Gastrointestinal Disorders), in addition to the prevalence of diarrhea, dyspepsia and hemorrhoids. These statistics get alarming skewed in the direction of diarrheal diseases when evaluating many developing countries and areas where sanitation is subpar. Together, this comprises a striking segment of the population
that at any given time is suffering from GI inflictions, most of whom, regardless of location and socio-economic level, have easy access to a pharmacist.

**Non-prescription Treatments and Triage**
Community pharmacies are impressively stocked with hundreds of products to treat everything from heartburn, stomach acid, gas, constipation and hemorrhoids - the entire gamut, as previous mentioned. The "stomach" section rivals "cough and cold" for sheer number and variety of products available. Ideally, patients seeking such products will speak to the pharmacist about their particular condition and gain valuable advice on the best course of action - which may or may not include pharmaceutical intervention. Despite being sown in an education of medicinal sciences, it is also a pharmacists professional responsibility to advice on simple lifestyle changes that could positively affect a complaint - its much more advisable to decrease coffee consumption than continuously down a cocktail of antacids and H2-blockers/PPIs, for example.

The same can be said for most GI complaints - the medicine is the bandage that accompanies the advice on how daily activities can impact GI health, and it is the responsibility of the pharmacist to impart this knowledge on those seeking treatment. Many national associations of pharmacists that fall under FIP's Membership umbrella plan and implement campaigns that address GI health in communities, some going so far as to test for colon cancer indicators with on-site pharmacy testing methods. Through these activities, pharmacists are literally opening the door to face-to-face interaction on good GI health based on lifestyle choices and, when necessary, supportive, short-term medications.

Along the same vein, it is also the responsibility of the pharmacist to triage patients and advise when it is necessary to seek the help of a physician. Pharmacists are trained to recognise chronic situations of all the most common GI complaints, in addition to acute occurrences (blood in stools or vomit, sharp intestinal pain, severe pain of any type) and in turn encourage patients to visit their physician. In this manner pharmacists are also serving a significant public health role, whether it be advising more rigorous treatment of constant heartburn and stomach acid (in turn decreasing the chance of further, long-term damage) or identifying outbreaks of transmittable diseases and food-borne illness.
Pharmacists: On the front lines of GI care

Patients and Prescription Medicines - supporting adherence

When considering GI conditions that are being treated by prescription medicines, pharmacists assume an increased responsibility in positive treatment outcomes. More severe gastrointestinal disorders such as Crohn's Disease, Irritable Bowel Syndrome to the extreme cases of stomach cancer require a team approach in which pharmacists are playing an increasingly present role. For less severe conditions that may often be remedied with one or only a few courses of treatment, the primary contribution pharmacists make is in supporting adherence to medicines regimes - ensuring as far as possible that patients take their medicines as they should.

The pharmacists role in adherence, and the role of adherence in the long term success of medicines use (extrapolating to the outset of healthcare economies) has been thus far largely under appreciated, and goes back to the pharmacists position as one of - if not the - most accessible health professional in communities. What pharmacists do (or do not) tell their patients about the medicines they are, should be or will be taking can be the difference between treatment success and failure, which in turn can affect both the burden of healthcare on national economics and societal growth. Unlike other members of the healthcare team, pharmacists are most often the last line of communication between medicines and patients – the way in which patients perceive medicines in relation to their health is and should be the responsibility of the pharmacist.

Although adherence is a concept not relegated solely to gastrointestinal medicines and treatments, it does have its place in the discussion when considering the number of medicines other than those specifically treating GI conditions - such as NSAIDS, to name but one - can seriously affect GI functioning. The pharmacist's role in a holistic approach to all medicines use is invaluable in ensuring to the best extent treatment success with fewest side effects.

As both pharmacists and we at FIP hope is becoming increasingly apparent to both our partners in healthcare and communities in general, pharmacists are in an ideal position to support patients in achieving good GI health - from top to bottom.