

Pictograms – drawing solutions

Authors

Régis Vaillancourt, CHEO, Canada
Jane Dawson, MEPS, New Zealand
Luc Besançon, FIP, the Netherlands

Who among the pharmacy community has never struggled to give medication instructions to an illiterate patient or to someone he doesn't share a common language with?

It is quite frequent for many pharmacists, whether they work in a community pharmacy, hospital or on humanitarian operations, not to share a common language with the patient they are offering pharmaceutical care. Such a situation could apply to tourists visiting your country or new immigrants whose knowledge of the national language(s) is not sufficient. This could also apply to people speaking only a dialect or a regional language, such as members of the community of First nations in Canada, the Native American in the USA, or Romani people in Europe. This is also true when pharmacists from abroad take part in a humanitarian operation (e.g. Haiti) as they may not be able to speak the national language (or been trained to speak it, due to the emergency of the situation).

Moreover, even if patients share a common language with their pharmacists, they usually rely on written information (on the label printed by the pharmacy team, the patient leaflet or the prescription) to remember how and when to take their medicines. However, what happens when we have communication barriers?

Under all these situations, the rational and more importantly the safe use of medicines with these patients is at risk. How can pharmacists, as healthcare professionals, contribute to solving this problem affecting a population which usually experiences heavier health burdens related to their illiteracy and/or their language skills.

A solution for pharmacists – the beginning of the story

To support pharmacists in their daily work when facing these challenges with these particular communities, the International Pharmaceutical Federation (FIP) through its Military and Emergency Pharmacy Section (MEPS) together with the Children Hospital of East Ontario (CHEO) initiated the Pictograms Project in 2004.

This project aims to provide medication instructions (and information) based on pictograms (or image) for helping such patients.

Initially the project consisted of software run under Access. The pictograms used in this software have been tested among several communities in the world to ensure that they are properly understood.

Of course, this software is not meant to replace the software used for dispensing products, but as a complement when pharmacists need to provide medication instructions into pictograms or in a different language.

The work on using pictograms to label medications has been rewarded by several awards and grants, such as the WHO Grant on Patient Safety in 2010 and the 2009 Canada Post Community Literacy Award. This software has also been presented to intergovernmental agencies, such as the World Health Organization, the UNICEF and other agencies from the United Nations family, and positive and enthusiastic feedback was received.

An improved version

As a result of comments received from the users (mainly pharmacists) on this version, a second version was developed by FIP-MEPS and CHEO, with the support of Applied Research and Innovation at the Algonquin College, Ottawa, Canada.

This new version of this software is now web-based and as such the technical requirements for its use is now limited to only having an Internet browser (e.g. Internet Explorer, Firefox or Google Chrome).

This updated version can be run either online (with Internet connection) or offline (as it can be downloaded on the pharmacy computer).

The new feature also enables the pharmacist to work in their own language (if this language has been loaded) and then select the language of the patient, so that the material and instructions will be printed in the patient's language.

The medication instructions can be printed into three major different formats:

- A label with the size able to be customized
- A Medication Information Sheet, which is the patient medication instruction for a particular medicine
- A Prescription calendar, which combines the medication instructions for all the medicines dispensed to the patient (so that he can have an overview of his current treatment).

If the online version was used by the pharmacist, the patient can also reprint at home the instructions of his treatment by entering a unique reference number, through a dedicated website.

Medication instructions (through pictograms and written information) include always:

- The medication name
- The route and quantity of medicines per dose
- The frequency

In addition, pharmacists can also add (optional items):

- the picture of the medicine (uploaded from his computer)
- the reason(s) for the use of the medication: what they are prescribed/dispensed for
- the precautions of use
- up to two side effects per medicine
- as well as any additional information (which will then not be translated into pictograms or in the patient's language).

Whenever needed, the pharmacists can always complete the information provided to the patient by handwritten information on the print of the medication instructions.

A secured system... with more innovations to come

When developing this second version, we have paid a particular attention to data privacy.

This is why the name of the patient will not be recorded in this software and it has to be added to the prints of the medication instructions.

This also enables pharmacists to create and then update medication instructions for the most common ailments treatment. Indeed, once you have create a medication instruction for the treatment of traveler's diarrhea, you could use the same medication instructions for all your patients needing the same advice, by entering the reference number of this particular medication instructions. You can also change the language of the patient before printing the instructions. Another application is to use this function for patient specific complex medication regimen. You can enter the complex drug regimen and using the reference number modify the treatment plan as needed without re-entering all the information.

In the near future, the software will also improve through additional features such as:

- audio files: not only the instructions will be given via pictograms, but the pharmacists could also play audio files so that the instructions will be given orally through the computer speakers in the patients' language.
- Personalization of pictograms: it was noticed during the validation of the pictograms in the field that the representation of concepts / elements may vary from one country to another. Therefore, in the future, we will be able to offer the pharmacist the ability to select different sets of pictograms (based on the culture of patients), so that the pictograms will be better understood by patients.

Using this software

To use this software you just need to go online at:

www.fip.org/pictogramsoftware

To enter the software, click on the “User button”.

If this is the first time you use this software, you will need to create your account; otherwise, you just need to enter your email and password.

Access to this software is **FREE** of charge, as the safety of patients is priceless.

It is also expected that an offline version will be available on the FIP website www.fip.org/pictograms in the coming months.

Supporting this project

As you have read earlier, using the software is free of charge, but if you are convinced by this project and willing to support it, here are a few ways:

- become an individual member of the FIP (for example of the Military and Emergency Pharmacy Section)
- help us to offer medication instructions to more patients and to include additional languages for pharmacists from all over the world: not only you will help your national fellow when they are travelling/immigrating abroad to receive medication instructions in their own languages, but you will also make sure that this software will be available to fellow pharmacists in your own language. Such a translation requires around one hour work and is volunteered. If you are interested, just email FIP headquarters at luc@fip.org and don't forget to mention the languages you could translate into. Such language can be either national or regional.
- share this great tool with your colleagues

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