

Original Article

MEMBERSHIP RATE, PERCEPTION AND AWARENESS OF THEIR PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION AMONG NEWLY LICENSED PHARMACISTS

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ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** The Malaysian Pharmaceutical Society (MPS) is the professional association for pharmacists in Malaysia. It plays a significant role in the continuous education of pharmacists by serving as a platform to inform members of the latest developments in pharmacy, to further stimulate interest and collaboration in research and also to uphold and enhance the standards and ethics of the profession. Unfortunately, like many professional associations, the goals of the MPS are hindered by its low membership rate. The objective of this study was to determine the membership rate, perception and knowledge of the MPS among recently licensed pharmacists.

**Methods:** A voluntary survey was conducted, using a questionnaire, among pharmacists who were recently licensed and in the process of completing their compulsory service. The total number of respondents was 175.

**Results:** Ninety-five percent of those surveyed felt that a professional association was important for the future of pharmacists, yet only 50% were MPS members. More than 85% of respondents were women and most of them (54.3%) were graduates from private universities. The majority of those who were not members of MPS indicated that they did not join MPS because they were unaware of the benefits of membership or lacked time for MPS activities. This is likely a contributing factor to low rates of membership observed among professional pharmaceutical associations worldwide.

**Conclusion:** Accordingly, we believe that greater effort by MPS, and similar professional bodies, to improve awareness of the association and benefits of membership would increase membership and the long-term will benefit the pharmacy profession.

**Keywords:** Malaysian Pharmaceutical Society, Pharmacy, Professional association, Survey, Membership.

INTRODUCTION

In this era of globalization, the evolution of professions is affected by historical, political, economic, geographical, demographical and cultural changes [1]. In addition, there are a number of other evolving trends that affect the ways in which a profession is practised, for example: (a) advances in technology (b) deregulation and increased competition in the context of globalization and (c) increased cynicism among members and distrust of the motives and behavior of the administrators of professional bodies [2].

The role of a pharmacist has expanded from primarily being the distribution of medicines and health supplements and product education to include patient-centered care and better health outcomes and quality of life. The profession is now regarded as an essential component in the multi-disciplinary provision of health care. Consequently, a professional association, which can assist in providing professional development for pharmacists in addition to protecting the interest of its members, is crucial for not only the pharmacist community, but can also impact healthcare as a whole [3].

In Malaysia, the Malaysian Pharmaceutical Society (MPS) is the professional association of pharmacists. The MPS protects the interests of its members through its representatives on the Pharmacy Board and the Poisons Board of the Ministry of Health, as well as in the consumers' affairs activities of the Ministry of Trade and Domestic Affairs, and other Non-Governmental Organizations. The society's core vision includes being an avenue for its members to be informed of the latest development and progress of the profession, to enhance professionalism, and to assist its member to achieve the standards of ethical excellence associated with the profession of pharmacy.

In order to keep pace with the ever-changing environment, professional bodies are taking various measures to meet these challenges, such as devising and implementing a variety of activities

to cater to the needs of its members (both social and professional), long-term strategies, plans and activities. However, most professional associations still face the challenge of low membership rates. It is estimated that only a mere 10% of all eligible pharmacists apply for membership in pharmaceutical associations [4]. In Malaysia, the membership rate is higher, but, even here, a few years ago, only 2,100 of 7,298 registered pharmacists (approximately 30%) were members of MPS.

Low membership is common in many professional associations (Bauman, 2008). Perception and awareness are crucial influences among young professionals whether they should or should not be members of their professional associations. Factors that influence the decision include membership status of colleagues, the belief that being a member is an important aspect of being a professional, emphasis given by postgraduate programmes to membership and the belief that the professional association will improve the profession [5]. Additionally, perceived value of membership, professional identity and role in the workplace have been identified as having a link to the decision of whether to become or not to become a member of a professional association [6].

The purpose of this study was to determine the membership rate among newly licensed pharmacists, the leading reasons why individuals choose not to become members, and their perception and awareness of MPS.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design and study population

This study consisted of a survey, using a questionnaire, of pharmacists licensed in 2006, who completed 3 years of service with the government in 2009. The questionnaires were distributed to the target population either in person during a seminar organized by the Pharmacy Division of the Ministry of Health Malaysia (where the

respondents were requested to return the completed questionnaires at the end of the seminar) or by electronic mail, where respondents were requested to return the completed questionnaire within a stipulated time.

### Survey design

The questionnaire was developed by a pharmacist and subsequently face and content validated by a senior academic pharmacist. It consisted of questions pertaining to the individual's demographic background (including age, marital status, place of work and the institution of graduation) and 9 questions regarding their views about MPS. All the questions, except one, were close-ended questions.

### Data analysis

The data that were collected from the questionnaires were entered into SPSS software version 15.0. Descriptive statistics such as average, majority etc were obtained for the variables.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Demographic data

Table 1 shows the demographic data.

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the respondents**

Gender	Number (n=175)	Percentage
Male	27	15
Female	148	85
<b>Race</b>		
Chinese	117	66.9
Malay	49	28
Indian	6	3.4
Others	3	1.7
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	115	65.7
Married	60	34.3
<b>Institution of Graduation</b>		
Universiti Sains Malaysia (Public)	31	17.7
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (Public)	24	13.7
Universiti Malaya (Public)	25	14.3
Sepang Institute of Technology (Private)	2	1.2
International Medical University (Private)	69	39.4
University College Sedaya International (Private)	17	9.7
Others (Private)	7	4
<b>Place of work</b>		
Hospital	115	65.7
Health clinics	26	14.9
Enforcement Division	17	9.7
National Pharmaceutical Control Bureau (NPCB)	9	5.1
Others	8	4.6

Of the 450 questionnaires distributed, 175 (39%) were duly completed and returned. Although there was no compulsion or incentives given to return the survey forms, this rate of return was disappointing. It could indicate a lack of time or apathy. Female pharmacists comprised 85% of the respondents and only 15% were males. The age of the respondents ranged from 25 to 37 years. Also, 66.9% of the respondents were Chinese, 28% were Malay and 3.4% were Indian. More than half of the respondents (65.7%) were single (unmarried). Approximately 40% of the respondents graduated from one particular private university, the International Medical University (IMU). Other respondents graduated from other institutions such as Universiti Sains Malaysia (17.7%), Universiti Malaya (14.3%), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (13.7%), and University College Sedaya International (9.7%). The higher number

of respondents from one particular institution could be because of the larger intake in that institution consequently leading to a larger number of graduates. Another factor could be that the graduates from private universities generally come from more affluent backgrounds and tend to be more open in giving their opinion.

Out of the 175 respondents, 65.7% of them were working in hospitals, 14.9% were working in a public health clinics, and 9.7% were working in the regulatory and enforcement division of the Ministry of Health Malaysia. Only 2.9% were working in the private sector.

Among the respondents, only 52.6% were MPS members despite the fact that the majority (61.7%) answered that a professional body was very important for the pharmacy profession, and only 0.57% of the individuals answered that a professional body was not important for the pharmacy profession. Not surprisingly, only 45.1% of study respondents regularly referred to the communication platform provided by the MPS to remain current with information on developments within the pharmacy profession. The result from our study was comparable with a study among teacher librarians in Australia, where only 40-45% of respondents were members of their professional organization [7].

The results of this study are also consistent with previous findings that graduates perceived and valued their professional qualifications but postponed the decision to become a member of the professional organization because of a lack of understanding of the role of the professional association [8]. Probably the role of the professional association is better understood only after working for a few years. In our current findings, surprisingly, only a few respondents identified the role of the Malaysian Pharmaceutical Society as representing the interests of the profession. In another similar study, students were asked to rank the reasons for joining the professional association. "Enhance my career prospects" was ranked as the most important reason [9]. In the current study, although not the main reason, many respondents also perceived that MPS encouraged professional development.

A common understanding regarding professional membership in MPS in the present study was that MPS served as a platform for communication among its member pharmacists. This indicates that respondents saw membership in MPS as an opportunity to network, meet new people and to keep in touch with fellow pharmacists. This is achieved via MPS through activities organized by the Young Pharmacists Chapter, the Pharmacy Night, the MPS Pharmacy Scientific Conference and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programmes. Previous literature also supports this view that membership in a professional association would enhance "professional socialization" [10].

The perception of the respondents regarding MPS is given in Table 2.

**Table 2: Perception of the roles of MPS**

Reason	Frequency	Percentage
Medium of communication among pharmacists	71	40.5
Source of information	73	41.7
Provider of CPE	34	19.4
R&D	14	8
Looking after the interest of profession	48	27.4
Encouraging professional development	29	16.6

The most common perception (41.7% of respondents) of MPS was that its primary role was as a medium or channel for information about the latest developments in the pharmacy profession. There were also about 40% of respondents who thought that MPS also worked as the medium of communication for all pharmacists in Malaysia. This is consistent with one of the aims of MPS to represent the views of the members in matters affecting the common interest of the profession and to foster intra-professional relationship among

members. However, a small number (8%) of respondents felt that the primary role of MPS was to serve as a research and development body. Actually, MPS also encourages the publication of scientific and professional information pertaining to the practice of pharmacy and it organizes a very popular MPS Pharmacy Scientific Conference almost every year [11]. There were 77 respondents who thought MPS played a role in encouraging professional development and looked after the interest of the profession.

Professional societies should represent the interest of the profession and contribute to continuous professional development [12]. They should also contribute to accountability and serve as the voice of the profession to society at large [13]. MPS also plays an important role in mediating the many issues between the pharmacy profession, other professions and the government and in representing its members and speaking on behalf of the profession [14]. While MPS probably sees itself as playing all these roles, from our results we see that less than 50% of the young pharmacists respondents shared that view. Most of the respondents, i. e. 66.3%, answered that the communication between MPS and pharmacists were only moderately effective. Only 13.1% felt that the communication was effective, and while 2.29% felt that it was very effective. Approximately one in five respondents, (18.29%), felt that the communication between MPS and pharmacists was not effective at all.

Only 45.1% of the respondents consistently updated themselves with information regarding developments in pharmacy via the communication platform provided by MPS. This result was troubling as pharmacists must constantly upgrade their knowledge and skills to ensure competency for practice. Realizing the importance of continuing education for its members, the MPS has set up a Malaysian Continuing Pharmacy Education Chapter. This Chapter facilitates the continuing education of the members by conducting courses, through correspondence and meetings held throughout the country. Such continuing education is also being pursued and supplemented by the activities of local area committees. The use of web-based continuing education programmes is convenient, improve accessibility and usually available at no cost or at low cost. In a study regarding Internet use for medical information and online continuing education for physicians, it was seen that the Internet was important for professional development and for seeking information seeking to provide better care [15]. Continuing professional development increases a pharmacist's confidence, competence and improves services [16] and Malaysian Pharmacists must not depend solely on MPS as the provider of CPD but also find other avenues and methods for CPD.

The main reason provided, by 35.9% of respondents, for why pharmacists do not join MPS was that they were unaware of the benefits of membership. Other reasons why pharmacists did not join included a lack of time for such activities (20.6%), the perceived expensive membership fees (18.2%) and that they were simply not interested in joining (15.8%). In addition to these reasons, there were also 2.4% of respondents who thought that one of the reasons that pharmacists did not join as MPS members was because they were unaware of the existence of MPS. Although there seems to be some understanding of the role of MPS, there was a general apathy towards the society and its activities. MPS has to embark on an effective awareness and marketing campaign to make more pharmacists aware of their activities. Table 3 shows that the majority of respondents (61.1%) were interested in contributing to MPS.

**Table 3: Areas in which the respondents would like to contribute to MPS**

Area of contribution	Frequency (n=120)	Percentage
Monetary contribution	9	7.5
Volunteer for MPS activities	71	59.1
Contribute opinions at regular meetings	18	15.0
Serve on MPS Council and subcommittees	21	17.5
Other	1	0.8

Of these 59.2% (n=71) indicated that they would like to contribute through volunteering for MPS-sponsored activities. This is an encouraging sign where young pharmacists are willing to spend time and energy for something that they feel is useful or something that they are passionate about. Only 21 respondents indicated that they would like to serve on the MPS Council & subcommittees, while 18 respondents just wanted to contribute by giving their opinions in regular meetings but did not want to take on any responsibilities. The use of social media as a means of communication should be encouraged to actively connect with younger pharmacist. Most young pharmacists prefer social media for quicker access, and its potential as a useful tool to disseminate professional and educational purposes should be widely adopted [17,18]. All the respondents were Malaysian citizens and this auger well for MPS. Younger members can be stimulated to be involved and take part in MPS activities provided their interests are met.

Table 4 gives the suggestions of the respondents to attract a larger membership. All the respondents who answered this question (37 of them) suggested that MPS provide better privileges to the members. As members, they wanted better benefits for the membership fees that they were paying yearly. However, it must be noted that the annual MPS membership fees are relatively low and have remained at RM120 for a number of years. With regards to recruitment, it was suggested that MPS could provide attractive promotion packages as well as organize more interesting activities to attract members.

**Table 4: Suggestions to increase MPS membership**

Reason	Frequency (n=37)	Percentage
Reduce the membership fee	23	62.1
Get more sponsors	12	32.4
Organize more interesting activities	22	59.5
Provide better privileges to members	37	100
Make members feel more appreciated	20	54.1
Others	4	10.8

A professional organization plays a number of different roles for its members. The roles may differ according to the members, but it includes training, recognition, advocacy and leadership. [19]. All the respondents in this study had graduated within 10 years and were less than thirty years old. The number of younger pharmacists will keep on growing as approximately 1000 additional pharmacists join the workforce each year. Therefore, the activities and programs offered by MPS for this target group must be relevant and focus on career development, finance and personal development.

The pharmacy profession is undergoing many changes, challenges and opportunities as the global healthcare scenario evolves [20,21]. The professional society must be aware and respond to these challenges. The active involvement of younger pharmacists should be encouraged and current leaders should be tactful when attending to them, as these individuals are the future agents of change for the pharmacy profession. They must be willing to listen and act accordingly in making the development of this profession every pharmacist's responsibility [22].

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while most of the pharmacists agreed that a professional body was important for the pharmacy profession, many thought that the role of MPS was mainly as a medium for communication and provider of information. More effort should be made by MPS to inform and educate pharmacists, especially the young pharmacists, on the role and contribution of MPS to the profession. The Young Pharmacists Group (YPG) of MPS is an active group that organizes Continuing Professional Development (CPD) activities for its members. It will be worthwhile for MPS to engage with this group and get feedback on what are activities that interest and motivate them. MPS should place greater emphasis on the needs of younger pharmacists and be more flexible in serving its members. A recent strategy of appointing young pharmacists to the council is a

good move to draw younger pharmacists to join MPS. The results of this study will also be presented to the MPS Council for their deliberation.

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#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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