

# Pharmacists' Challenges in Promoting Rational Use of Natural Health Products

By: Mr. Muhammad Suhaidi Sha'ari

The popularity of natural health products (NHPs) has increased in recent decades, driven by various socio-economic [1], cultural [2, 3], and health-related factors [3]. NHPs are widely available over-the-counter, where consumers can self-select and use these products without a prescription. Consumers often utilise NHPs not only for general health maintenance but also as a means of preventing and treating various ailments [4]. Given the increasing popularity of NHPs, it is crucial to address the challenges faced by pharmacists in promoting their rational use, ensuring consumer safety and efficacy. There are three challenges addressed in this section; (i) limited knowledge about NHP; (ii) lack of standardised guidelines; and (iii) consumer misconception about NHP (as shown in Figure 1).

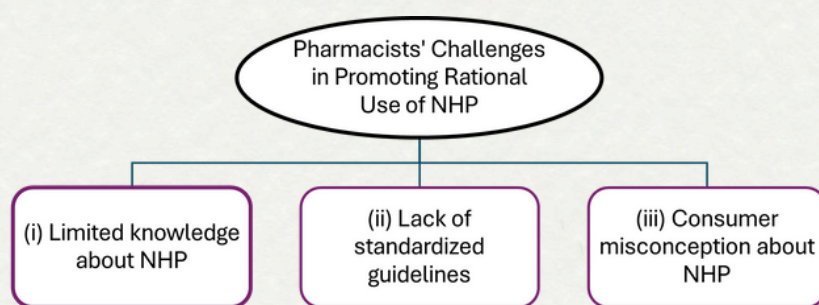


Figure 1: Challenges in promoting the rational use of Natural Health Products

## 1) Limited Knowledge about Natural Health Product

Pharmacists are often the first point of contact for consumers seeking advice on NHPs. However, their training may not extensively cover the complexities of these products. Pharmacists generally have a basic understanding of NHP but lack detailed knowledge, particularly regarding efficacy and safety [5-7]. There is a significant gap in education and training on NHP, which poses a risk to public health due to the risk of NHP-related problem. There is a consensus among pharmacists and pharmacy students that more comprehensive education and training on NHP is necessary to meet consumer needs and ensure safe usage (8, 9). This knowledge gap can hinder their ability to confidently advise patients on appropriate NHP selection, dosage, and potential risks, ultimately limiting their effectiveness in promoting responsible use.

## 2) Lack of Standardised Guidelines

Currently, there is a significant gap in available resources for pharmacists dealing with NHPs. To date, there is no comprehensive, established treatment guideline for NHP across various medical conditions. While there are some efforts for developing treatment guideline using NHP for type-2 diabetes mellitus [10] and asthma [11], a careful consideration of safety concerns should be prioritized. This differs from conventional medicine, where pharmacists can rely on established Clinical Practice Guideline (CPG) for various medical conditions [12]. The absence of such guidelines for NHPs can lead to inconsistencies in patient care, as pharmacists may provide varying advice or recommendations based on their individual knowledge and experience.

### 3) Consumer Misconception about Natural Health Products

One significant challenge pharmacists face is the prevalence of consumer misconceptions surrounding NHP. Many consumers believe that NHP are inherently safe simply because they are labeled as "natural," despite the fact that natural does not necessarily mean safer or better [13, 14]. There is a misconception that natural health products are free from harmful substances. In reality, some products have been found to contain toxic compounds, heavy metals, microbes, and banned ingredients [13]. This belief can lead to a false sense of security, prompting consumers to underestimate the potential risks associated with NHPs, including side effects, allergic reactions, and interactions with other conventional medicine.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, while NHPs are deeply embedded in Malaysia's multicultural culture and widely accepted for their perceived health benefits, pharmacists face significant challenges in promoting their rational use. These challenges include limited knowledge and training on NHPs, a lack of standardized treatment guidelines, and consumer misconceptions about the safety of NHPs. Addressing these issues is crucial to ensure that pharmacists can effectively guide consumers in the safe and effective use of NHPs, thereby safeguarding public health and enhancing the overall efficacy of healthcare practices.

### References:

1. Ganasegeran, K., A.K. Rajendran, and S.A.R. Al-Dubai, *Psycho-socioeconomic factors affecting complementary and alternative medicine use among selected rural communities in Malaysia: a cross-sectional study*. PloS one, 2014. 9(11): p. e112124.
2. Teow, Y.E.E., et al., *A cross-sectional evaluation of complementary and alternative medicine use in a non-urban Malaysian population*. Journal of Community Health, 2021. 46: p. 515-521.
3. Ramdzan, S.N., et al., *Perceptions of complementary/alternative medicine use and influence on evidence-based asthma medicine adherence in Malaysian children*. NPJ primary care respiratory medicine, 2019. 29(1): p. 5.
4. Wahab, M.S.A., et al., *Why Did I Consult my pharmacist about herbal and dietary supplements? An online survey amid the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia*. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 2022. 19(17): p. 10994.
5. Rogge, M., P. Kumar, and O. Grundmann, *Front-line health care professionals lack critical knowledge in dietary supplement and nutraceutical products: A call to action for comprehensive educational opportunities*. Journal of Clinical Pharmacology, 2022. 62(1).
6. Younis, N.A.K.Y., *The prevalence, attitude and awareness of herbal medicine products use among pharmacy practitioner in Jordan*. Pharmacognosy Journal, 2019. 11(5).
7. Thin, S.M., et al., *A systematic review of community pharmacist practices in complementary medicine*. Pharmacy Practice, 2022. 20(3): p. 1-25.
8. Harnett, J.E., et al., *Defining and supporting a professional role for pharmacists associated with traditional and complementary medicines: a cross-country survey of pharmacists*. Frontiers in Pharmacology, 2023. 14: p. 1215475.
9. Abd Wahab, M.S., et al., *The need for evidence-based complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) information in Malaysian pharmacy curricula based on pharmacy students' attitudes and perceptions towards CAM*. Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning, 2014. 6(1): p. 114-121.
10. Bradley, R., et al., *Algorithm for complementary and alternative medicine practice and research in type 2 diabetes*. The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine, 2007. 13(1): p. 159-176.
11. Amaral-Machado, L., et al., *Use of natural products in asthma treatment*. Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine, 2020. 2020(1): p. 1021258.
12. Academy of Medicine of Malaysia. *Clinical Practice Guidelines (CPGs)*. 2024 September 1, 2024; Available from: <https://www.acadmed.org.my/index.cfm?%5C&menuid=67>.
13. M. Pauzi, N.A., et al., *Safety assessment of natural products in Malaysia: current practices, challenges, and new strategies*. Reviews on Environmental Health, 2022. 37(2): p. 169-179.
14. Mohd Roziman, N.S., et al., *Constructs for safe-use of natural health products among Malaysian consumers*. International Journal of Social Science Research, 2023.

# PRESCRIPTION

LATEST NEWS AND UPDATES FROM THE FACULTY OF PHARMACY



#### Editorial Advisor:

Prof. Dato' Dr. Abu Bakar Abdul Majeed

#### Authors:

Prof. Dr. Khaled Mohamed Anwar Abushanab, Dr. Zafirah  
Liyana Abdullah, Dr. June Choon Wai Yee, Mdm. Nur  
Syazwani Taridi, Ms. Nurulfalihin Daud @ Ibrahim, Dr.  
Fazleen Haslinda Mohd Hatta, Mr. Mohd Alimukhti  
Mansoor, Dr. Gurmeet Kaur Surindar Singh, Ms. Nurul  
Alyaa Ibrahim, Madam Nur Fathiah Mohd Radzi, Mdm. Nik  
Ateerah Rasheeda Mohd Rocky, Ms. Nik Aisyah Najwa Nik  
Mustaffa Shapri, Mr. Muhammad Suhaidi Sha'ari, Prof.  
Dr. Mizaton Hazizul Hassan

#### Editors:


Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mahmathi Karuppanan  
Dr. Gurmeet Kaur Surindar Singh

#### Illustrator:


Mdm. Nurul Izzati Ismail

## PRESCRIPTION


Faculty of Pharmacy,  
Universiti Teknologi MARA,  
Kampus Puncak Alam,  
42300 Bandar Puncak Alam, Selangor.

 @pharmacyuitm




 @pharmacy\_uitm





 Faculty of Pharmacy UiTM



 <https://pharmacy.uitm.edu.my/>



 +603-3258 4645

 korporatff@uitm.edu.my