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Physicians remain best qualified to prescribe, says World Medical Association

(16.10.10) The right to prescribe medicine should be competency based and ideally the responsibility of the physician, according to the World Medical Association in a new statement today. At its annual General Assembly in Vancouver, the WMA agreed new policy on drug prescribing and revised guidelines on the relationship between physicians and pharmacists.

Physician representatives from 50 national medical associations agreed that although nurses and other healthcare workers cooperated in the overall treatment of patients, the physician was the best qualified individual to prescribe independently.

The policy statement said: 'In some countries, laws may allow for other professionals to prescribe drugs under specific circumstances, generally with extra training and education and most often under medical supervision. In all cases, the responsibility for the patient's treatment must remain with the physician. Each country's medical system should ensure the protection of public interest and safety in the diagnosis and treatment of patients. If a system fails to comply with this basic framework due to social, economical or other compelling reasons, it should make every effort to improve the situation and to protect the safety of the patients.'

'Although physicians are the best qualified individuals to prescribe independently, they must recognise their limits and look for guidance and help when necessary. When unsure about prescribing a drug, physicians should look for guidance from a senior colleague, pharmaceutical formulary and/or published literature.'

The new statement declared that inappropriate drug prescription without proper knowledge and accurate diagnosis might cause serious adverse effects on the patient's health.

It added: 'Prescription of drugs should be based on a correct diagnosis of the patient's condition and should be performed by those who have completed a curriculum on disease mechanisms, diagnostic methods and medical treatment of the condition in question.'

In its revised statement on the relationship between physicians and pharmacists the WMA said that the two professions had complementary and supportive responsibilities and this required communication, respect, trust and mutual recognition of each other's professional competence. Collaboration between the two professions was imperative, particularly on the development of training and information sharing with one another and with patients. It was necessary to keep an open and continued dialogue between physicians' and pharmacists' representative organizations in order to define each profession's respective functions and promote

the optimal use of drugs within a framework of transparency and cooperation, all in the best interests of patients.

Dr. Edward Hill, Chair of Council of the WMA, said: 'The debates we had at our Assembly demonstrated quite clearly that the issue of prescribing is viewed differently in different parts of the world. The WMA's job is to assist physicians with guidelines on best practice and to ensure that health care for patients is of the highest quality.'

'Our patients will be served best when pharmacists and physicians collaborate together, recognizing each other's roles, to ensure that medicines are used safely and appropriately to achieve the best health outcome.'