

# The vital role of pharmacists in asthma management



*By Robert Oliphant, President and CEO, Asthma Society of Canada*

**May is Asthma** Awareness Month, with World Asthma Day being observed on Tuesday, May 6, 2014.

Each year, the month of May provides community-based pharmacists with the opportunity to highlight their role in asthma management with their patients, in their places of business and in their communities. The Asthma Society of Canada has long recognized the important role pharmacists play in helping both newly diagnosed and long-term patients improve their quality of life. Many people with asthma report that pharmacists are the health care providers that they interact with most in their daily management of asthma and, as such, are critical in helping patients control their chronic illness.

## **Three million Canadians have asthma**

Asthma is one of the most common chronic conditions affecting Canadians with 8.5 per cent of those over the age of 12 having been diagnosed with this respiratory disease. Approximately 300,000 British Columbians suffer from asthma and its prevalence continues to grow slowly but steadily.

While it affects people of all ages, it is the most common chronic disease among children, with 15.6 per cent of children between the ages of four and 11 years, and 11.7 per cent of youth between 12 and 19 years of age having been diagnosed with asthma. It is the largest cause for emergency department visits of children in Canada and a leading cause of hospitalization. Asthma not only presents a serious burden to those who suffer with it, but also to society.

It is estimated that the total annual cost of asthma care in Canada is well over half a billion dollars, with the major costs being medications, followed by physician visits and hospital treatment. Misdiagnosed, poorly treated and poorly managed asthma represents the lion's share of asthma-related health costs.

## **Low mortality, but high morbidity**

Between 250 and 300 Canadians die each year from asthma. It is estimated that more than 80 per cent of those deaths could be prevented with proper asthma education and management.

Most people, however, live with their disease a long time. Patient studies reveal that many asthma patients perceive their illness to be controlled, but when questioned appropriately, are actually living with uncontrolled asthma. People with uncontrolled or poorly controlled asthma are at the greatest risk for a serious, life-threatening asthma exacerbation. The goal of symptom-free living is the shared responsibility of patients, their families, health care providers, asthma educators and society as a whole.

Despite advances in understanding the disease, and the availability of more efficacious medications, asthma is still a major cause of morbidity. This is often a result of under-diagnosis, under-treatment, lack of public understanding and knowledge about the disease, and inadequate asthma supervision.

## **Community pharmacists are key players in asthma management**

Pharmacists are in a pivotal position to contribute to the overall management of asthma. Pharmacists play a key role in

educating patients by providing information on the types and purposes of asthma medications, demonstrating how to use inhaled medications properly, providing information about peak flow meters and other devices useful for asthma management, questioning patients about their written asthma management plan and monitoring use (or not!) of medications by individual patients.

Several studies over the last three decades have clearly shown the therapeutic and economic value of pharmacist-delivered asthma education, assessment and monitoring. Better care has been shown to lead to better asthma control, which leads to improved quality of life, and reduced hospital care and physician visits. Most asthma patients visit pharmacists on a monthly basis to fill their prescriptions. These visits provide the best opportunity for on-going asthma care by knowledgeable health care professionals.

## **Allergies count, too**

While the right medication delivered in an effective manner is critical, it is only one part of asthma management. Environmental control measures are also important to avoid or eliminate factors that trigger asthma flare-ups. Pharmacists can ask patients about their household environments, outdoor activities and other personal triggers and may suggest that they seek further medical advice regarding allergy control.

This May, the Asthma Society of Canada and the National Asthma Patient Alliance encourage every pharmacist to take special effort with their asthma patients. It could save a life.