

*Ethical Viewpoint Paper*

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## Manipulation and Tampering of Prescriptions by Patients

Avinash De Sousa

Research Associate and Consultant Psychiatrist, Department of Psychiatry, Lokmanya Tilak Municipal Medical College, Mumbai

**Corresponding Author:** Avinash De Sousa

**E-mail:** avinashdes888@gmail.com

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There have now been stringent rules with regard to dispensing psychiatric medications over the counter and many chemists have been fined and have also lost their licenses. The over-the-counter use of medication via chemists, including the use of psychiatric medication, has always been a cause of worry in the India and neighbouring countries [1]. Over the last 5 years, the rules on dispensing psychiatric medication have become stringent and chemists have to dispense the exact amount of medicine written on the prescription for the time duration mentioned. The chemist also stamps the prescription with the amount of medicine dispensed so that the patient does not use the prescription at another chemist or another counter to obtain more than the amount prescribed.

This means that patients must follow up with the psychiatrist regularly, have themselves evaluated, and get a fresh prescription that must be signed by the doctor and also carry his seal. There are many patients who do not adhere to this rule. Many a time, chemists who have known a patient over the years tend to continue dispensing medication to the patient for durations which far exceed that prescribed by the doctor. This is rather dangerous as the patient may end up taking antidepressants, antipsychotics and sedatives for months or at times, years, without a valid prescription. They may also develop side-effects that could ensue under unsupervised consumption [2].

At times, patients manipulate the prescription when chemists adhere to the rules and dispense the exact dose specified. They increase the dose on their own so that their medicines last longer and they can avoid follow-up for reasons best known to them. Sometimes, they increase the duration of the prescription on their own and may thus continue with their medication without visiting the doctor. As a doctor, this bothers me as it is the doctor who would bear the responsibility were there some mishap. We are in an era in which doctors are governed by strict rules and are not spared the consequences of the slightest negligence [3].

Patient manipulation of prescription occurs in many different ways. First, they may change the date on the prescription and use the same prescription to procure more medication. Second, they may change the dosage on their own and may consume increased dosages of the same medication as they may develop a tolerance or dependence on certain medications like benzodiazepines. Thirdly, they may also visit more than one psychiatrist simultaneously and have thus multiple prescriptions for the same medication, thus having a larger stock with them. They may hide from the other psychiatrist that they are under treatment and in good faith fresh prescriptions shall be issued. Some patients remove colour xeroxes of the doctor's blank prescription and use it again forging the doctor's signature and patient's have even gone to the extent of making a false seal of the doctor. Lastly and very interesting is the proposition, when a patient with psychiatric problems owns a chemist and consumes medications on his own as he has free access to the same or the patient may be a pharmacist in a hospital and may thus steal pills for his own abuse and gratification.

The authorities are always in a hurry to malign the doctor and impose all sorts of rules to book a doctor for any form of lapse or negligence. The law to prevent violence against doctors is underway [4]. But do we have rules in place for bringing to book patients who take the law into their own hands and manipulate prescriptions. Even though it is their fault, they blame doctors for the long-term side-effects of medication and give excuses for not following up and manipulating a doctor's prescription. The real reasons for not following up include having to travel long distances, lack of finances, poor social support, laziness at times and family problems. It has been reported in the scientific literature that patients with a drug abuse problem may manipulate a prescription to procure certain opioid drugs or sedatives [5].

When, however, patients who seek help for other psychiatric problems do the same, what are the doctors supposed to do? Should they continue treating such patients with the same vigour even when a patient has threatened the integrity of the doctor–patient relationship? Is there a tribunal or a body where doctors can be warned of such patients? Patients who manipulate their prescriptions are committing a serious ethical violation and this needs to be looked into from the perspective of healthcare.

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