





How pharmacy can lead the way with a RealFix

by Chris Linville

In the late 1990s, Jabeen Ahmed's partner suggested they open a pharmacy in the working-class city of Paterson, N.J. As she learned more about Paterson, Jabeen says she remembers thinking to herself somewhat jokingly, "Oh no, this is going to be really hard."

However, the more she thought about it, the more it appealed to her. Jabeen, who grew up in nearby New York City, points out with pride that she is a third-generation community pharmacist, as both her grandfather and father were pharmacists, and her father owned a pharmacy in New York.

"He loved what he did, and he had done an amazing service for the public," she says of her father. "I knew when I got to New Jersey, that's what I wanted to do. The reason Paterson turned out to be so ideal was because it was a place that needed so much care. There were so many opportunities to impart knowledge to the public about their disease state, about medications, and just the many different facets of their health care and the opportunities to counsel them."

OPIOIDS

Opioid abuse: A national crisis

Millions of Americans suffer from pain and are often prescribed opioids to treat their conditions. However, the dangers of prescription misuse, opioid use disorder, and overdose have been a growing problem throughout the United States.

Since the 1990s, when the amount of opioids prescribed to patients began to grow, the number of overdoses and deaths from prescription opioids has also increased. Even as the number of opioids prescribed and sold for pain has increased, the amount of pain that Americans report has not similarly changed.

Opioids are highly addictive, and opioid abuse has become a national crisis in the United States. Statistics highlight the severity of the epidemic, with the National Institute on Drug Abuse reporting that more than 2 million Americans abuse opioids and that more than 90 Americans die by opioid overdose every day, on average.

From 1999 to 2019, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said nearly 247,000 people died in the United States from overdoses involving prescription opioids. Overdose deaths involving prescription opioids more than quadrupled from 1999 to 2019.

In 2020, the CDC said there were 91,799 drug overdose deaths in the U.S. Deaths involving synthetic opioids other than methadone (primarily fentanyl) continued to rise, with 56,516 overdose deaths reported in 2020. Those involving psychostimulants with abuse potential (primarily methamphetamine) also continued to increase to 23,837.

Jabeen and her partner opened Sheefa Pharmacy in 1998, and have since added two additional stores in East Orange, N.J., and Clifton, N.J. The business employs about 45 people, including a half-dozen pharmacists. In the almost quarter century since opening, Sheefa Pharmacy has become an iconic community presence. Along with traditional health care services, it has made its mark through humanitarian and charitable efforts. Every year it gives away food during Thanksgiving and Christmas and provides outreach to the homeless. It also has raised awareness of issues such as human trafficking and domestic violence.

"We do a wide variety of outreach that often pertains to the inner city," Jabeen says.

FACING A FORMIDABLE FOE

Paterson has a population just shy of 160,000, according to the 2020 U.S. Census. It is a multicultural city, evolving into a major destination for Hispanic immigrants as well as others from Turkey, the Arab world, and South Asia. Paterson has the second-largest Muslim population in the United States by percentage, and between 75 and 120 languages are spoken, many of them Arabic dialects and Spanish. Jabeen speaks five languages herself.

Unfortunately, the nationwide opioid epidemic and the overall scourge of drug abuse has not spared Paterson, spiking noticeably in recent years, and more so during the pandemic.

"It started growing and became extremely obvious, in the sense that we had never seen heroin overdosing in the South Paterson streets (before)," Jabeen says. "I think the most remarkable thing was mothers who were addicted to heroin. A lot of houses of worship and community centers became alarmed when they

saw so many young people overdosing and dying."

Jabeen had years of experience talking with patients about their prescriptions and medications, so she started using that background to counsel those struggling with substance abuse.

"I really started out almost as a lone wolf," she says. "I was counseling maybe five hours a week to see what their issues were, and then redirecting them to services. About 6-7 years ago I had become familiar with harm reduction and tried to encourage patients to get on Suboxone to normalize their lives. Especially in New York state and New York City there's been a big movement to take away some of the barriers to [Suboxone] access and the perception of addiction."

Taking it a step further, Jabeen says that on late afternoons on Fridays she will canvass the street, speaking to patients and trying to get them services.

"It's funny, someone saw me and asked me if I was campaigning," she says with a laugh. "I said no, I'm just trying to get people off the street, quite frankly."

Jabeen lends her time and talent to numerous organizations, including serving as a board member for the board of pharmacy for the New Jersey Division of Consumer Affairs and a commissioner on the Passaic County Board of Social Services, along with membership in APhA and NCPA. It's not surprising that she was a co-founder of a local organization called the Coalition for Awareness and Fighting Abuse, or CAFA.

"It's basically an activist group where we would inform each other about all of the things going on in the city," she says. "We would

post videos, and then we would do lectures, lectures in the community center, about substance abuse and signs of abuse for parents.”

A REAL FIX

With some 1,700 opioid-related overdoses annually, Paterson was looking for a way to stem the tide. Mayor Andre Sayegh invited Jabeen to team up with Ed Boze, the city’s chief innovation officer, and other health care officials to find a solution to one of the major care deterrents — access to medication-assisted treatment. Paterson was one of 15 cities from 99 countries and 631 applicants to win the Global Mayors Challenge run by Bloomberg Philanthropies, former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s charity. The \$1 million grant supports an opioid treatment program that will make MAT for addicts available anytime and anywhere.

The initiative, called RealFix, is designed to provide people with substance use disorder with MAT 24 hours a day through an emergency call center, telemedicine appointments, an all-night pharmacy, and medication deliveries within 90 minutes. The goal is to offer rapid intervention when people run out of opiates and begin going through painful withdrawals, officials said.



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OPIOIDS

"People who are addicted to opiates fear withdrawal more than they fear death," Boze said during a press conference outside Sheefa Pharmacy describing the program. He pointed out that treatment services tend to be closed at the times when people are most willing to seek help. As a result, they face withdrawal then beg, steal, or try sex work to get money for more drugs.

HOW IT WORKS

Under RealFix, people can call 8-3-3-REALFIX or 9-1-1, and be connected to a telehealth physician who then wires a prescription to a 24/7 pharmacy (including Sheefa Pharmacy) that will help fill the prescription within 90 minutes. Once that's done the medication is delivered to the patient's location or picked up at the pharmacy itself. (During the pilot stage Jabeen says the average time between a call to the hotline and the reception of MAT averaged 77 minutes.) Once the prescription is delivered, the patient will then be referred to a medication-assisted treatment center which the Rutgers University Medical School has vetted.

To support the initiative Paterson has created an opioid response team, or ORT, which is comprised of a Paterson Fire Department EMT, a police officer and an outreach worker from Eva's Village, a nonprofit, comprehensive behavioral health and social service nonprofit organization with a mission to provide care and support for people struggling with poverty, hunger, homelessness, and addiction. ORT intervention involves proactive outreach in the corridors of the city where drug overdoses are most concentrated. Jabeen also serves on the Paterson Police Department's ORT, as a pharmacist and a community member.

"Some of the original doctors that were part of the pilot were simultaneously educating people. We want to increase the database of professionals who will be involved, so it's not just myself, it's other pharmacies, doctors with the ultimate goal to create a very successful program

in our area, a model for the rest of the state," Jabeen says. "Locally the goal is to get a success rate with proper data to exemplify that if you put the work in and you have the service available and you have a good team involved, you can have success. We're still in the preliminary stages of creating a very solid foundation."

CONTINUING OUTREACH

For her part, Jabeen is trying to educate the community about the availability of RealFix. Not surprisingly, her people skills pay dividends.

"What I actually do is go out myself with one of my biggest allies, the local barber," she says. "He really is one of the champions for this cause. He knows a lot of people in the community because they come in to get their hair cut, so he's tuned in. If he knows of people who are abusing, he will give them my phone number or the service number and we will



Paterson's Clara Barton

Jabeen Ahmed, owner of Sheefa Pharmacy in Paterson, N.J., has become something of a heroic figure in Paterson, especially during the height of the pandemic when she made hundreds of house calls to check on the elderly, the disabled, and those who were scared and uncertain. In March, Paterson honored her by giving her a key to the city during a ceremony, with Mayor Andre Sayegh saying, "She put herself in harm's way to protect people, and that is the epitome of altruism. She made house visits to test people for COVID-19 and vaccinated them too. She is the Clara Barton of our time."

Jabeen, who received her PharmD from the University of Florida, modestly deflects the praise, saying, "I never care about getting any recognition for the work. This is simply what pharmacists do every day. It just comes so naturally to us."



1 *Jabeen Ahmed stands outside Sheefa Pharmacy, the business she co-founded in 1998.*

2 *Jabeen receives the key to the city of Paterson, N.J., from Mayor Andre Sayegh (left). To Jabeen's left are Jerry Speziale, director of public safety, and Mike Powell, director of economic development.*

3 *Jabeen speaks at a press conference after Paterson was awarded a \$1 million grant from Bloomberg Philanthropies for its RealFix initiative to reduce drug overdoses through medication-assisted treatment.*

4 *Jabeen (fourth from right) with members of the Paterson Police Department.*

5 *As COVID-19 cases spiked with the omicron variant in early 2022, Sheefa Pharmacy coordinated with Paterson city officials to put a mobile testing unit in front of city hall. A total of 5,000 KN-95 masks were banded out to any residents who needed one.*

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try to get them into treatment and into a program.”

Fighting a seemingly tidal wave of addiction isn’t easy, but Jabeen takes a one-at-a-time outlook. She says that if you can get one person into treatment, that person has a 50 percent chance of recovery. Access to treatment is another barrier that Jabeen is working to overcome, and that’s where she says community pharmacy can play such a significant role. She points out that a bag of heroin costs \$3. It’s easy to find and easy to buy, and providing access to treatment before someone in withdrawal potentially puts himself or herself in harm’s way is critical.

Jabeen also recognizes that there is stigma about addiction, that some even see it as coddling or overlooking criminal behavior. She says it’s more complicated than that.

“It’s about the way we think, our mindset about addiction,” she says. “Instead of people thinking this is

a moral dereliction or somehow a failure in a person’s character or personality, it’s about making them understand that this is a disease, similar to diabetes. If somebody has diabetes, the easiest thing to say is stop eating sweets. But it’s not that easy, is it? It’s not just a simple thing like ‘don’t eat cookies.’”

Jabeen has seen this firsthand through counseling with patients. She knows that people often felt shame or went into denial if they had a child abusing drugs. She recalls a mother, a prominent professor, who had a son who was incarcerated.

“She would leave to see him in jail and would tell everybody that she was going home to cook dinner for the son because she didn’t want to tell people that she was visiting him in jail,” she says.

Jabeen says she recalls another time when a woman came to the pharmacy and grabbed her by the arm, with tears in her eyes.

“She looked at me and said, ‘I need you to help my son, he’s using heroin and I’m scared that one day I’m going to find him dead on the floor,’” she says. “I’ll never forget the desperation in her eyes and in her voice. I’m a parent, and I think that’s the worst feeling to feel like you can’t help your child. There’s nothing you can do, and you are watching them die slowly.”

Jabeen agreed to counsel the woman’s son and did so on a weekly basis for several years, getting him on MAT.

“I remember it was years of counseling when he finally opened up to me and said, ‘You know why I started using, right?’ And I said, ‘No, why?’ He said, ‘I was raped by my uncle.’”

For Jabeen, it was a startling and disturbing revelation, and made her realize that while medication is important, it’s only part of it.

“There’s counseling, there’s psychiatric treatment, there’s medical treatment, and there’s a big need for family support,” she says. “Patients need a lot of care and sincere love, and they need people who are going to listen to them, including their family members who are not going to judge them, and it’s very difficult. A lot of people just want their loved ones to snap out of it.”

TIDE TURNING

Jabeen says she’s encouraged that with programs such as RealFix,

Fast Facts: Sheefa Pharmacy, Paterson, N.J.

ESTABLISHED: 1998 (locations also in East Orange, N.J., and Clifton, N.J.)

MANAGEMENT: Jabeen Ahmed and partner Amjad Kwaik, owners

PRODUCTS & SERVICES: Includes standard retail, COVID-19 testing and vaccinations, medication therapy management, patient education, free delivery, online refills, disease state management, medication synchronization and compliance packaging, online drug information glossary, wellness center, compounding, and durable medical equipment.

NCPA MEMBER SINCE: 2005

people struggling with addiction in Paterson will at least have a better opportunity to get their lives pointed in a positive direction.

"Early on in my career it was really sad because a large majority of them died," she says. "Now I can see the tide turning and that we're at least able to get them treatment to lead a semi-normal life. I say semi-normal because your brain becomes completely hard-wired differently [from addiction], so the goal is to get people to have normal lives in the sense that they can function on a daily basis, hold jobs, and have decent interactions with their family members."

Even with her passion for helping people, Jabeen says it can be draining.

"It's a hard road," she says. "This is not for everybody; I have to be honest with you. There are days when I have to take it down 10 notches. As much as you try to remove yourself from the individual, ultimately we're human so we feel pain, even if it's someone's else's pain."

While Jabeen is humbled by the accolades that she and Sheefa Pharmacy have received, it's the role that pharmacy plays in contributing to improved health outcomes and helping the community that constantly motivates her.

"I saw how important it was to everybody else, and how they looked at the pharmacist saying, 'Wow, you do this and you have this knowledge,'" she says. "They recognize that. My first and immediate response was this is a victory for pharmacists, because we are doing this every day, all the time, naturally, and getting recognition for it." ■

Chris Linville is *America's Pharmacist*® managing editor.

Statistics from the Department of Health and Human Services

48,006

PEOPLE OVERDOSED ON OPIOIDS IN 2020

71-80%

OF OVERDOSE DEATHS INVOLVE OPIOIDS

519%

INCREASE IN OVERDOSE DEATHS INVOLVING OPIOIDS FROM 1999 TO 2019

