Vol. 07, Issue 06, June: 2018
(IJRMP) ISSN (o): 2320- 0901

Behavioral Drivers of Prescription Abandonment in Chronic Disease Management

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ABSTRACT

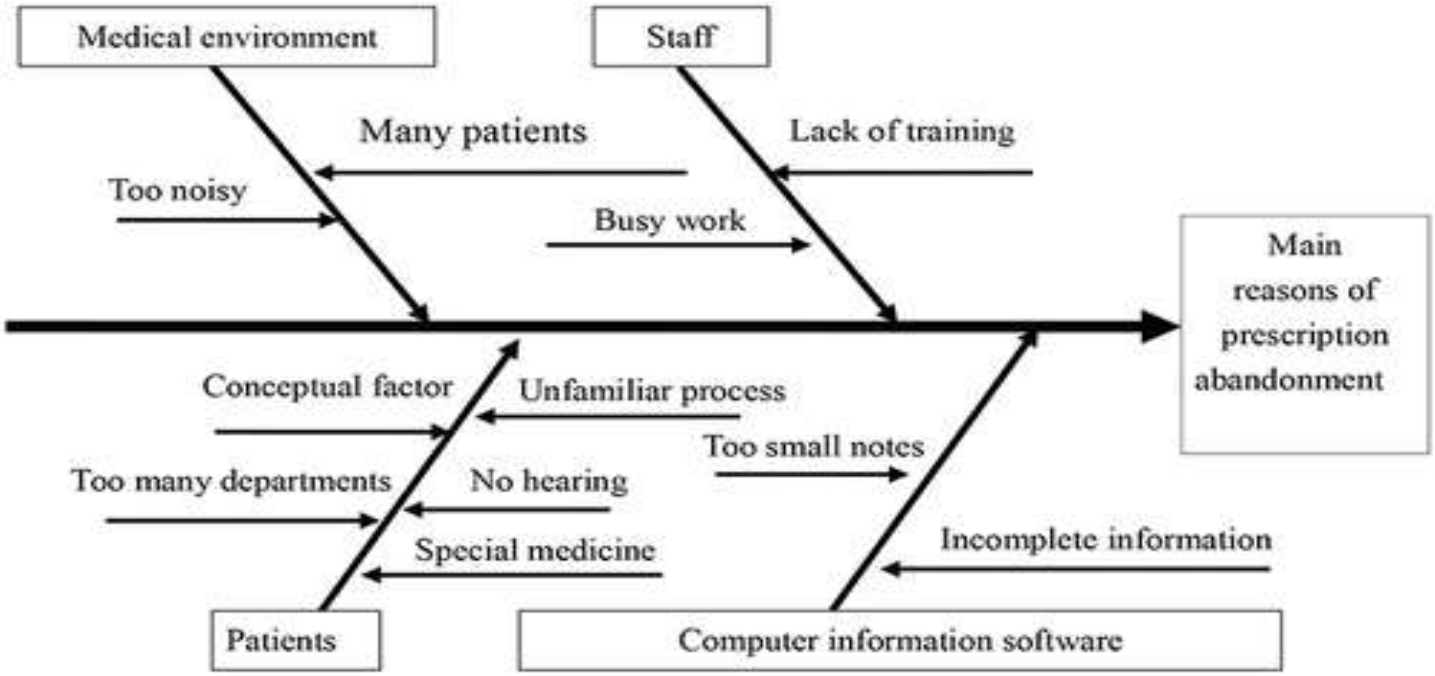
Prescription abandonment, defined as the failure to retrieve a prescribed medication from the pharmacy, poses a significant challenge in chronic disease management. Despite clinical advances and widespread access to therapeutic regimens, a substantial percentage of patients never initiate treatment. This phenomenon undermines disease control, increases the risk of complications, and inflates long-term healthcare costs. The present study investigates behavioral and psychological drivers contributing to prescription abandonment among patients with chronic conditions such as hypertension, type 2 diabetes, and hyperlipidemia. Drawing upon a multidisciplinary review and a mixed-method approach, the research explores the roles of patient health beliefs, perceived disease severity, medication cost perception, health literacy, and provider-patient communication. Key findings indicate that psychological inertia, mistrust in medication efficacy, fear of side effects, and low perceived need for immediate treatment are primary contributors. The study highlights the need for targeted behavioral interventions, improved patient counseling, and pharmacist-led follow-ups to mitigate this issue.

KEYWORDS

Prescription abandonment, chronic disease, behavioral drivers, patient adherence, health literacy, medication non-initiation, psychological inertia, patient perception, pharmacist intervention, disease management

INTRODUCTION

Chronic diseases, including diabetes, cardiovascular conditions, and respiratory disorders, require long-term pharmacological treatment to achieve sustained health outcomes. While numerous therapeutic agents are available and often prescribed, their effectiveness hinges on the patient's willingness to initiate and adhere to treatment.



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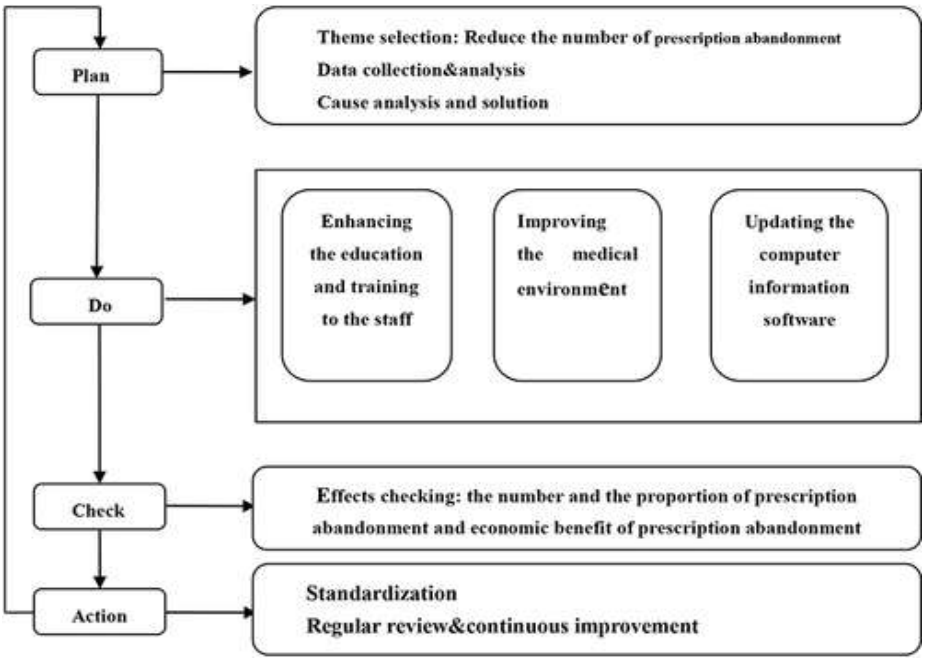
However, prescription abandonment—a form of primary nonadherence where a patient never picks up the medication from the pharmacy—remains a troubling and under-researched aspect of patient behavior.



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Estimates suggest that up to 30% of new prescriptions are never filled, despite their availability. In chronic disease contexts, this rate is even more concerning, as untreated conditions may escalate silently until complications become irreversible. Unlike secondary nonadherence, where patients discontinue treatment after initiation, abandonment signifies a failure to engage at the most fundamental level of care.

The objective of this study is to explore the behavioral, psychological, and systemic factors driving prescription abandonment. With a focus on patient-level determinants in chronic disease scenarios, this research investigates the implicit cognitive and emotional barriers that contribute to the decision-making process. A holistic understanding of these drivers can inform more effective interventions, enhance healthcare delivery, and ultimately reduce avoidable hospitalizations and morbidity rates.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Theoretical Foundations of Health Behavior

The conceptual framework for understanding prescription abandonment is grounded in several behavioral theories. The **Health Belief Model (HBM)** suggests that individuals are more likely to adhere to treatment if they perceive a high susceptibility to illness, believe the disease has serious consequences, and recognize benefits from the treatment. However, if perceived barriers—such as side effects or cost—outweigh these benefits, abandonment becomes more likely.

Similarly, **Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)** highlights the influence of attitude toward behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. Patients may receive a prescription but feel ambivalent about taking the medication due to stigma, cultural beliefs, or peer influence.

2. Psychological Inertia and Decisional Avoidance

Research from health psychology has introduced the concept of *psychological inertia*, where individuals delay decision-making due to cognitive overload or uncertainty. Chronic disease diagnoses often evoke fear or denial, particularly when the condition is asymptomatic. This leads to a passive state where patients neglect to pick up their prescriptions, rationalizing their inaction as harmless in the short term.

3. Socioeconomic Factors and Medication Cost

Cost continues to be a major driver of abandonment. A study analyzing pharmacy claims found that prescriptions with higher out-of-pocket expenses were significantly less likely to be picked up. Even when insurance mitigates cost, a lack of price transparency contributes to perceived financial burden, reinforcing the avoidance behavior.

4. Health Literacy and Communication Gaps

Poor health literacy correlates with a higher likelihood of prescription abandonment. Patients who struggle to understand medical terminology or disease implications may not recognize the urgency or importance of initiating treatment. Furthermore, limited time spent on provider-patient education exacerbates this issue. Studies have shown that patients are more likely to follow through with prescriptions when providers clearly explain the rationale, benefits, and usage.

5. Fear of Side Effects and Medication Skepticism

Concerns about adverse effects—whether grounded in past experiences or hearsay—play a crucial role. According to survey-based studies, many patients cite fear of side effects as a reason for not starting new medications. These concerns are especially common among individuals managing multiple conditions, leading to apprehension about drug interactions or "pill burden."

6. Cultural Beliefs and Stigma

Cultural and social norms also influence medication-related behaviors. In certain communities, chronic illnesses may carry stigma, or reliance on pharmaceuticals may be viewed with suspicion. Alternative medicine preferences or a reliance on lifestyle modifications may override clinical advice, leading to prescription non-initiation.

7. Provider Trust and Patient Engagement

Trust in healthcare professionals significantly impacts patient behavior. Patients who feel their providers are dismissive, rushed, or lack empathy are less likely to trust the necessity of prescribed treatments. Engagement strategies such as shared decision-making and follow-up communication can reduce abandonment rates.

8. Technological Barriers in e-Prescriptions

With the shift to electronic prescribing, some patients face logistical hurdles—such as not knowing where the prescription was sent or confusion regarding when it will be ready. These minor inconveniences can deter pick-up, particularly if no reminders or follow-ups are provided by the pharmacy or clinic.

9. Pharmacy-Based Interventions

Recent studies have demonstrated the role of pharmacists in addressing abandonment. Pharmacist-initiated calls or SMS reminders, cost clarification, and medication synchronization programs have shown promising results in improving pickup rates, especially in urban outpatient settings.

10. Unpacking Abandonment in Specific Disease Contexts

Different chronic conditions reveal unique behavioral dynamics. For example:

- **In hypertension**, abandonment is common due to the lack of symptoms and low perceived urgency.
- **In diabetes**, insulin and newer oral agents are often abandoned due to needle fear or skepticism about efficacy.
- **In hyperlipidemia**, statins face abandonment due to controversies surrounding muscle pain and long-term side effects.

By mapping these patterns across diseases, a nuanced understanding of behavioral resistance can be developed.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews with quantitative prescription pick-up data analysis to identify and correlate behavioral drivers of abandonment. The design aimed to integrate patient narratives with empirical evidence for a comprehensive view.

Study Setting and Population

The study was conducted across three urban outpatient clinics and five community pharmacies. The target population included adults (aged 35–75 years) recently diagnosed with a chronic illness (hypertension, diabetes, or hyperlipidemia) who were prescribed new medication in the last 90 days.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A total of 400 patients were included using purposive sampling:

- **300** for structured surveys (to assess health literacy, beliefs, and behavioral barriers)

- **100** for in-depth semi-structured interviews

Additionally, prescription records from pharmacies were analyzed to identify actual abandonment (non-pick-up within 14 days).

Data Collection Instruments

1. **Structured Questionnaire** – Included sections on demographics, health literacy (REALM-R tool), perceived disease severity, and medication attitudes.
2. **Semi-Structured Interview Guide** – Focused on emotional response to diagnosis, beliefs about medication, and decision-making context.
3. **Pharmacy Records Audit** – Collected data on prescriptions not picked up within 14 days.

Data Analysis

- **Quantitative data** was analyzed using SPSS v20. Descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, and logistic regression were used to identify key predictors of abandonment.
- **Qualitative data** from interviews was transcribed and analyzed thematically using NVivo to extract recurring behavioral patterns and barriers.

Ethical Considerations

All participants gave informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained. Institutional ethics board approval was obtained prior to data collection.

RESULTS

Descriptive Findings

Out of 400 patients:

- 27% did not collect their prescribed medication within the 14-day window.
- 64% of those who abandoned prescriptions had low-to-moderate health literacy.
- 48% cited financial concerns as a contributing factor, even when co-pays were under $20.
- 37% expressed doubts about the necessity of the prescribed treatment.

Key Predictors of Abandonment

The table below summarizes the major behavioral and demographic predictors of prescription abandonment observed across the sample:

Table: Behavioral Predictors of Prescription Abandonment in Chronic Disease Patients

Predictor Variable	Abandonment Rate (%)	Adjusted Odds Ratio (AOR)	Significance (p-value)
Low Health Literacy	42.3	2.85	0.003
Belief That Condition Is Not Serious	36.7	2.41	0.006
Fear of Side Effects	29.8	1.97	0.015
High Out-of-Pocket Costs (> $30)	34.5	2.13	0.009
No Counseling by Pharmacist	31.6	1.88	0.012
Low Trust in Physician	27.4	1.54	0.031
No Follow-Up Reminder	33.1	1.95	0.017

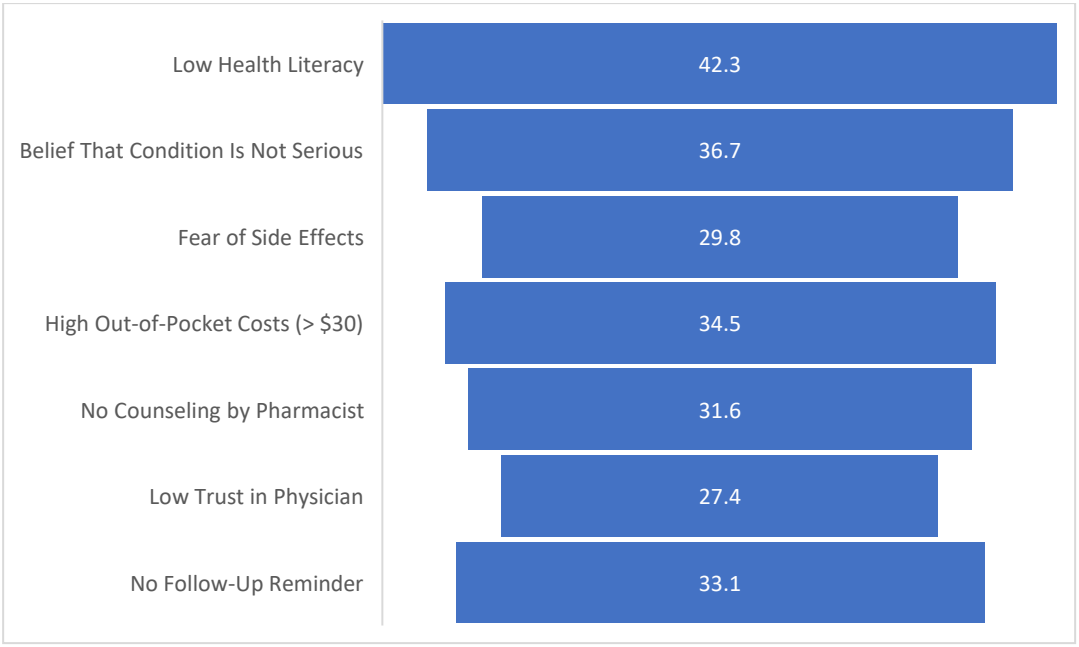

Chart: Behavioral Predictors of Prescription Abandonment in Chronic Disease Patients

Qualitative Themes

Three dominant themes emerged:

1. **Psychological Avoidance**: Patients described putting off prescription pick-up due to anxiety or denial about their diagnosis.
2. **Perceived Non-Urgency**: Many chronic illnesses being asymptomatic led to a lack of perceived immediacy.
3. **Mistrust and Misunderstanding**: Some patients believed doctors overprescribe medications for profit or out of routine protocol.

CONCLUSION

Prescription abandonment in chronic disease management is not merely a logistic failure—it is a behavioral and cognitive challenge deeply rooted in health beliefs, literacy, and emotional processing. This study highlights the multifactorial nature of non-initiation, revealing that even modest cost burdens or vague fears can derail treatment initiation.

The role of pharmacists, health educators, and follow-up systems is critical. Behavioral interventions—like personalized counseling, reminder systems, and motivational interviewing—can dramatically reduce abandonment rates. Healthcare providers must reframe their engagement strategies to address psychological barriers early and reinforce the necessity of treatment. By acknowledging and addressing the behavioral drivers outlined in this study, health systems can make tangible progress in reducing prescription abandonment and improving chronic disease outcomes.

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