



Letter to the Editor

Medication Dispensation for Psychiatric Outpatient at UKMMC during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

Following the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia since 2020, the federal government has implemented a series of national lockdown measures termed the Movement Control Order (MCO). Since then, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Medical Centre (UKMMC) has implemented rigorous preventive measures to contain the outbreak. As the outpatient follow-up visits for stable patients substantially reduce in numbers and are supplemented by tele-consultation¹, challenges remain with regards to allowing patients to continue to obtain their medications hassle-free, and to make the process as contact-free as possible, since aggregation of patients at the pharmacy can be a potential occasion for virus exposure and transmission.^{2,3} Realizing the needs, new pharmacy services are made available to psychiatric outpatients to try to dispense medications in safely and efficiently. The main objective of this letter is to describe the innovations in medication dispensation service for psychiatric patients at UKMMC.

Ordinary dispensing service

The ordinary dispensing service for psychiatric outpatients at UKMMC is carried out

via the outpatient pharmacy counter at the hospital. Patients can collect their medications personally at the counter once their doctors have completed their prescriptions in the electronic pharmacy system. According to the UKMMC Pharmacy department client's charter, pharmacists must deliver efficient dispensing service and ensure at least 95% of patients receive their medications within 15 minutes.⁴

All hospital formulary psychotropic drugs are dispensed in this manner. Hospital formulary drugs refer to a list of essential medications which are approved and deemed necessary by the hospital according to their efficacy, safety, and costs. Patients can obtain these medications by paying the standard pharmacy fee. Other non-formulary medications that are available at the hospital's non-formulary drug store that patients need to purchase separately if they are prescribed such medications. These are usually original patented medications with higher prices.

UMP service

The UMP ('*Ubat Melalui Pos*', translated in Malay which meant for 'Medications by Post') service is a collaboration with Pos Laju Malaysia, the courier branch of the national postal service

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of Malaysia, which delivers medications to the patient's home with certain minimal fees, depending on the weight and location covered by the postal service. This is similar to the UMP service provided by the facilities under the Ministry of Health Malaysia.

The UMP service has been established before the COVID-19 pandemic in UKMMC. It functioned as an option for patients to receive their discharge medications. After the imposition of the MCO, the UMP service is expanded for all stable outpatients of the Psychiatry Clinic. Upon agreeing to the UMP option, the patient will be directed to send a text request to the designated number in a text messaging application, and the patient will be screened for eligibility within the stipulated period. Once the request is accepted, the patient's medications will be packed and sent to their home within 5 to 7 working days. By utilizing the UMP service, patients can avoid coming to the hospital, thereby minimizing the risk of COVID-19 exposure and prevent wastage of time due to long waits at the pharmacy and delayed travel caused by traffic checkpoints as part of the MCO measures. However, medications that require cold storage or injectable drugs cannot be delivered through this method.

PDA service

The PDA (*'Panggil Dan Ambil'*, Malay for 'Call and Collect') service is another initiative which has been made available a few years ago. In the original service, patients will call one day in advance and collect their medications the very next day at the pharmacy, without the need of queuing up and waiting.

Since the MCO came to enforcement, the PDA service has been upgraded into a drive-through

service. A side lobby of the hospital building is transformed into a drive-through counter, where personnel of the Department of Pharmacy dispense medications directly to the patient, who remains in their vehicle. A patient who is interested in the service can call the Department of Pharmacy to make a request. An immediate screening over the phone will be conducted to check for suitability. Once accepted, the patient will be assigned a serial number for reference. A day before the desired day for medication collection, the patient can call to make an appointment and the medications will be packed according to the prescription. Strict social distancing is maintained between the dispenser and the recipient of the medications, with the dispenser donning appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). The PDA service allows the dispensing of medications without the patient alighting from their vehicle and queuing up. Cold-storage items can also be dispensed via PDA. The workflows for the UMP and PDA services at UKMMC are illustrated in Figure 1.

Eligibility criteria

The choice between the newer PDA or UMP services and the ordinary dispensing service is voluntary. However, there are a few criteria to be met. Patients who are using both PDA and UMP services must be clinically stable, aware of their prescriptions and medications, or supported robustly by caregivers or family members. Nevertheless, UMP service is restricted only for medications which are non-fridge items. Medications to be posted must be within the delivery radius. Meanwhile, PDA patients are not bound to any restrictions and so long the patients or relatives of patients have logistic access to the hospital to obtain the medications.

Payment scheme

Since UKMMC is a partially subsidized public university hospital, a standardized pharmacy fee of 40.00 Malaysian Ringgit (equivalent to about 9.50 US Dollars) is imposed on patients for each formulary prescription. The medication supply of two months will be provided at each dispensation through the UMP or PDA

services. However, such fees are waived for those who hold a disability card under the Malaysian Persons of Disabilities Act 2008, elderly aged 60 and above, and government servants. Patients may pay the fee through online transactions seamlessly for convenience, with terms and conditions applied.

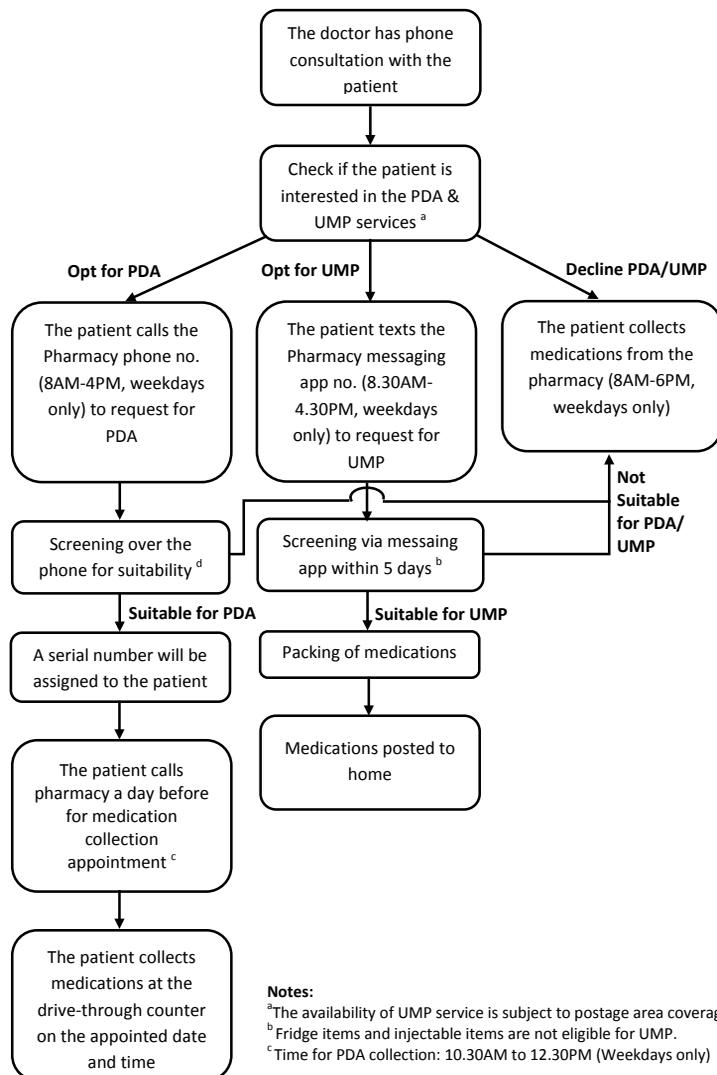


Figure 1. Utilizing the PDA (*'Panggil Dan Ambil'*) and UMP (*'Ubat Melalui Pos'*) services for stable patients at the Psychiatry Clinic, HCTM, UKMMC during the MCO period

Service Utilization

Patient utilization of the UMP and PDA services is reflected in the subscription numbers for the services. At the time of writing, 364 patients receive their psychiatric medications using the UMP service. As for the PDA service, 50 psychiatric patients have signed up for it. Patients prefer UMP over PDA as UMP is more convenient and efficient, not requiring patients to come over to the hospital.

Limitations

Contrary to hospitals under the Ministry of Health Malaysia that provide fully subsidized medications, we have an extra challenge in a university teaching hospital. Some of the prescribed medications are not in the hospital formulary. Hence, they need to be purchased separately by the patient in the non-formulary drug store in the hospital. Patients on non-formulary medications are thus not eligible for the PDA and UMP services. Nonetheless, efforts have also been made to allow patients with state pensioner status who enjoy waiver for medication purchase by emailing their supporting documents to utilize the services.

Conclusion

Despite the difficulties posed by the pandemic and the ensuing movement control orders, efforts are made to improve the medication

dispensation process for psychiatric outpatients at UKMMC. Such value-added services may require wider advertising among psychiatric patients.⁵ Furthermore, innovations in this respect should consider the specific conditions of a healthcare institution.

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