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schizophrenia fail to adhere to treatment. This is of tremendous concern, and is a leading cause of readmission to psychiatric care facilities.”

Lewis adds that pharmacists’ interaction with patients provides the opportunity to reinforce the message that psychiatric medicines need to be taken on an ongoing basis, and to address any concerns relating to possible side effects.

“People do not always understand the chronic nature of mental health conditions, and pharmacists are well positioned to explain to patients that these treatments are not a ‘quick fix’ but must be taken continuously, exactly as prescribed.

“Most people return to the same pharmacy each month to collect their prescribed medicines, and where pharmacists become aware that a patient has not collected their prescribed medication when it is due, this is an opportunity to reach out to those patients and encourage them to remain on their treatment.

“When people start treatment with psychiatric medicines, they will begin to feel better within a few weeks to a month because the medication reduces the symptoms associated with their mental health condition. Unfortunately, some people feel an improvement and think they no longer need their medication, however this is not how most psychiatric medicines work.

“Pharmacists’ clinical knowledge and experience enables them to empower patients to better understand that they should not stop taking their medication simply because they are feeling better, as the symptoms will return,” Lewis explains.

“Pharmacists tend to be more accessible to patients than psychiatrists, and are able to provide advice on the practical



aspects of taking medication. Their trusted position provides an opportunity to open discussions with patients that can encourage medicine compliance and support mental health,” Hosking adds.

According to Hosking, choosing to take prescribed psychiatric medication is a very complicated decision for many patients, and may involve a number of considerations including family pressures, finances, and traditional beliefs.

“A pharmacist who notices that repeats of a prescription have not been filled can make an enormous difference by following up with the patient and encouraging them to remain on treatment.”

“In certain cases where children are prescribed psychotropic medicine, their parents may decide to stop the treatment without consulting a doctor. A pharmacist may advise parents against stopping their child’s treatment, whereas the treating doctor may not even be aware that the medication has not been collected from the pharmacy. The pharmacist is often the only healthcare professional who could be aware that treatment is not being followed,” Lewis notes.

She says that the consequences of discontinuing psychiatric medicine without consulting a doctor can be serious. “Where anxiety is not treated properly in childhood, it can lead to lifelong depression. Parents therefore have a great responsibility to ensure their child takes

prescribed medicine for as long as deemed necessary by the treating healthcare professional.”

“It is important for patients to understand that one cannot simply ‘take a break’ from psychiatric medicine. Apart from the mental health difficulties this invariably leads to, discontinuing treatment may cause the initial medicine to be less effective. When returning to treatment, the patient may therefore require a higher dose or a different type of medication to manage their mental health.”

“Patients should have regular consultations with their treating psychiatrist or doctor to monitor their treatment. At different life stages, certain medicines may need to be adjusted, for example. For day-to-day queries relating to psychiatric medicines, however, pharmacists are a most valuable healthcare resource and should be acknowledged for their contribution to the nation’s mental health and wellbeing,” Hosking says.

“Thank you to South Africa’s pharmacy professionals for the crucial role you fulfill in supporting adherence to psychiatric treatment. While it is difficult to quantify the difference you make to patients, their families and the wider community, we are certain that your contribution improves quality of life for hundreds of thousands of South Africans and, in some cases, your advice and care is nothing short of life-saving,” she concludes.