

Peer support groups

Requirements

Pharmacists are required to join or start a group of **at least four** consistent professional peers that **meets at least twice a year** to support each other professionally and share learnings from successes, mistakes, innovations, case studies and published research.

Why are peer support groups important?

Professional connectedness is recognised as important to prevent competence diminishing over time. Peer support groups are a way to maintain connectedness and reduce professional isolation. Professional isolation is a significant issue for many pharmacists, particularly those working as sole charge or locum roles and can also be an issue for those working in larger organisations in which there are few pharmacists or few working in a similar field.

Structured peer support groups (PSG) have also been shown to have benefits on health care professional general health, perceptions of workload pressures, participation and development opportunities at work and in support at work.¹

What is a peer support group?

Peer support occurs when people provide knowledge, experience, emotional, social or practical help to each other.² A peer support group is a **safe, collegially supportive place to talk** about clinical and practice **issues in confidence**. It allows multiple and diverse perspectives to be brought to bear to assist in relevant and timely learning from experience. A peer support group is a way of giving and receiving support based on respect, shared responsibility and mutual agreement.³

Criteria for peer support group

A peer support group is a consistent group of at least four pharmacists or other health care professionals who meet to **discuss clinical and practice issues**. This group could meet in person or online. Group members should all have the opportunity to contribute to the discussion. Members are expected to actively participate and should expect to have some of the group time focused on their practice and development needs. The opportunity for reflection on practice is a crucial element of the group discussion.

Peer support is most effective between participants who consider each other as equals. A peer support group should ideally be between peers who are at similar career stages and in similar or related specialties and disciplines, to reduce any power imbalances. However, it is OK if your peer

¹ Peterson, Ulla et al Journal of advanced nursing, 2008-09, Vol.63 (5), p.506-516 DOI: 10.1111/j.1365-2648.2008.04743.x

² Shery Mead, David Hilton, Laurie Curtis, "[Peer Support: A Theoretical Perspective.](#)" Archived 2010-11-24 at the [Wayback Machine](#)

³ Creamer MC, Varker T, Bisson J, et al. Guidelines for peer support in high-risk organizations: an international consensus study using the Delphi method. *J Trauma Stress* 2012; **25**: 134– 141.

support group is made up of pharmacists with more diverse experience so long as you have a trusting, safe, collegial environment.

What does not meet the criteria for a peer support group?

While working alongside other pharmacists or health care professionals does constitute professional engagement, it does not fulfil the requirements for a PSG as a PSG provides space for support, sharing and critical reflection on practice in a way that day to day working may not. Similarly, involvement in the following activities do not meet requirements for a peer support group

- Pharmacy email chat groups (while these might be useful for answering practice questions)
- Attendance at groups that focus entirely on socialising as a means of support and connection
- Attending learning or training events with other pharmacists or healthcare professionals
- Uni- or multidisciplinary meetings focused on service issues or improvement
- Workplace staff meetings

Who can be in your peer support group?

The membership of your PSG should reflect your natural peers for your role. For many this means their group is likely to be pharmacists only, but for others it may include other health care professionals. Either is acceptable, just bear in mind the conditions that make for effective peer support groups – members are peers, creating an environment of trust and openness and avoiding power imbalances within the group that can affect this.

While other healthcare professionals can support the development of your clinical skills and knowledge they are less able to help you critically evaluate your more pharmacy specific competencies.

How many people in the peer support group?

There are no hard and fast rules on this other than the minimum number of people attending a meeting is four. When deciding the best size for your PSG consider the purpose of the group, likely fluctuations in attendance, duration of the meeting and how the size impacts of the opportunity of each person to contribute and to discuss their own issues.

It is anticipated that peer groups will have consistent relatively stable membership which will enable you to develop a sense of belonging to your group. The trusting relationships that develop within the group will support and enrich group members.

Can you have more than one peer support group?

You can be involved in as many peer groups as you find valuable. There are some pharmacists who are already involved in multiple groups, each with a different focus, which supports the review and development of different aspects of their practice. You only need to document attendance of one group twice yearly.

Can your peer support group meet more than twice a year?

Your group can meet as frequently as they like. There are significant benefits in meeting more frequently than twice yearly as trust builds over time and health care professionals involved in peer group have commented that the best discussions only eventuate after several meetings, when participants become comfortable with the group and feel free to be frank.

What do you discuss in a peer support group?

A wide range of things can be discussed in a peer support group. What you choose is likely to be influenced by what your group feels its main purpose is. The key element is that the topics discussed are of substantive professional value to group members. The topics discussed can be brought along on the day or pre-planned.

Some examples are

- Case study / presentation
- Share an intervention
- Discuss a difficult situation or critical incident
- Share learnings from successes, mistakes, innovations
- Present and discuss a journal article or guideline
- Cultural competence and safety
- Members bring something to discuss focused on a theme / topic
- Examples of practice that provide evidence of particular competency
- [Guest] speaker followed by discussion on application into practice
- Conference presentation feedback

You are likely to find the discussion is most beneficial if you keep a focus on supporting each other to stay competent and try avoid political and other non-competence issues where possible.

How to find a peer group

- Approach colleagues or peers to form a group
- Contact professional support organisations who are facilitating the formation of groups
- Consider your purpose in finding a peer support group – what aspect(s) of your practice will it be most useful for you to focus on – in helping to guide you to find suitable peers to form a group with

Organising a peer group

Practicalities

Location

Consider if your group will meet in person or online

- In person – the location could be at a workplace, one of the group members' homes or other suitable place. Whatever it is you need to consider that the location allows you to maintain the confidentiality of any patients discussed and the privacy of group members
- Videoconference – which platform will you use, do all your members have suitable technology

Timing and frequency

What time works for the group?

Examples of peer groups already in existence

- Pegasus Small Groups
- General practice / primary care pharmacist groups in various regions
- Local community pharmacist groups
- Pharmacist prescriber peer group
- Chronic pain management group in primary care
- Team meetings in hospital when they have a focus on learning and development
- Ministry of Health pharmacists
- Multidisciplinary peer groups in primary care

How long will you meet for?

- In deciding this consider
 - how many are likely to be in your group and how much time might be needed to present and discuss each person's issue or topic (generally between 15-30 minutes)
 - practical considerations of time available at your chosen time of day
- Meetings are likely to be between 1-2 hours

How often do you want to meet?

- Trust builds over time and peer group participants have reported that the best discussions only eventuate after several meetings, when participants become comfortable with the group and feel free to be frank
 - does the group wish to meet more frequently in the set-up phase to help build trust and rapport more quickly?

Group roles

There are several roles that successful groups allocate out – these may be taken in turns by the group members or permanently allocated

- Facilitator / co-ordinator to
 - arrange meeting times and venue
 - manage the flow of discussion during the meeting
- Timekeeper
- Note taker if you wish to have one person take and share notes for the group. If not, members can write their own notes

Ground rules

At your first meeting it is worth spending some time to discuss the ground rules for the group. A few examples of what this might include are

- Establishing a clear sense of purpose
- Patient confidentiality and group member privacy. It is important each group member understands that what is discussed in peer group is confidential to enable an environment of trust and as patient cases may be discussed. This extends to the notes from the meeting which are confidential to group members
- Demonstrating & encouraging active listening
- Taking a compassionate stance
- Trying to stay curious
- The group as a respectful collegial space
- A place to validate concerns & bear witness
- Commitment to attendance and notifying if you can't attend
- How / when to leave the group if it not achieving purpose

Agreeing on structure of the meetings

- How often and long do you wish to meet for
- How will time be apportioned (and managed) fairly between group members
- Do you want to plan the content of the meetings in advance or do members bring what is relevant to them at the time?
 - do you want a mixture of these?

- how / when will you make that decision e.g. discuss / plan next meeting at end of current meeting

Purpose

Consider the purpose of your PSG – this could vary depending on your sector and type of practice and may be very broad or more specific, for example

- To reflect on and improve on our clinical knowledge and skills in providing care to patients
- To connect with others [similar scarce or distant pharmacists] to share practice challenges and experiences of dealing with them
- To support the connection and development of pharmacist prescribers all sectors
- To help hospital pharmacists with education role to develop their teaching skills to better meet the learning needs of junior pharmacists and students on placement

Structuring a meeting

Having a nominated facilitator / or co-ordinator for the discussion is helpful to keep the discussion moving and staying on topic and to time.

There are many ways to structure a meeting and the discussion within it. One potential structure is

- You may wish to start with a check in round at the beginning to signal how things are at work and indicate what they are looking to discuss today. It is also a chance to indicate what help they would like from the group
- Proceed with the agreed structure e.g.
 - first person briefly presents a case, journal, challenging situation for discussion, piece of work and where relevant describes the context and their thought processes and feelings
 - the discussion starts with other group members acknowledging the presenting pharmacists work, and asking clarifying and probing questions. At this stage it is important to bear in mind what the presenting pharmacist wants to get out of the discussion
 - the presenting pharmacist summarises the takeaway learnings from the discussion for them
 - move onto the next person
- At the end you may wish to finish with a check out round
- Set the date for next meeting before you leave and potentially plan the structure / focus / priorities for the next meeting

Create a safe supportive environment

A safe supportive environment is crucial to a productive peer support group.

Some keys to fostering trust, mutual respect and understanding are

- An attitude that all members of the group are equals (peers)
- Develop a collaborative focus / shared vision of the purpose of the group to establish points of connection
- Stay curious and ask questions to help others elaborate and understand their internal experience and / or clinical reasoning through your interest in them
- Assume people have done their best
- No direct criticism or threatening attitudes from group members - blame and shame free conversations
- Keep to time limits
- Encourage participation by all members
- Encourage and plan for socialisation - the end of the meetings is a good time for this

Behaviours that can be less helpful to developing a supportive environment include

- Falling into theorising and intellectualising
- Jumping to problem solving for other group members
- Expressing judgement and criticism
- Advice giving
- Over sharing of own experiences. Only share your own experience if you have reflected on it and are fairly certain they would find it helpful or if they have specifically asked to know. Be mindful not to share “how I managed it better” recollections which can be experienced as shaming¹

Documentation

You have three options for documenting your peer support group attendance

1. You may already participate in a peer support group. If the documented outputs / notes from this group contain the information in the minimum data set you can meet your requirements by uploading these as a PDF into MyRecert
2. Use the template to record the notes from your peer support group (your group may designate a note taker to do this for the group).

There are options for uploading the meeting notes

- a. Your note taker can PDF the notes and upload to MyRecert for all group members. You would then add any optional information you wished to include directly into MyRecert
 - b. You can add any additional information to the original word document, PDF it and upload yourself to MyRecert
3. Use your own template that includes the minimum data set and upload as a PDF

You may choose to upload or reference any supporting information from the group e.g. journal articles discussed, slides from a presentation.

Minimum data set

- Date of meeting
- Venue / modality of meeting
- Names of attendees and registration numbers
- Summary of discussions noting issues around confidentiality and privacy

Optional information

- Name of note taker (if you have one)
- Personal reflection on learning
- Any relevant references or supporting information

Privacy and confidentiality of discussions

Peer groups are intended to be a supportive place where concerns and issues can be shared in confidence within the group. Consequently, you only need to record a brief summary of the topic(s) of discussion.

The amount of detail documented should be appropriate to share with people outside of your group such as verifiers or auditors and should not breach the privacy and confidentiality of group members or any patients discussed.

Tips from pharmacists who have successful peer support groups

- Make sure you have a clear purpose or focus for the group
- Confidentiality of patients and privacy of participants is really important – both during the discussion and in the notes from the meeting
- It is important to have someone to drive / structure / facilitate the meeting to keep purpose and momentum going
- Great to have multidisciplinary peer support groups, but also need to engage with pharmacist peer support groups to focus on pharmacist competencies. Each group contributes something different

How does the peer group link to other recertification activities?

Discussion within your PSG can help inform

- The identification of your development needs to include within your **professional development plan**
- The development of your **culturally safe practice**
- Your reflections for your **written reflective account**

Your PSG may be a place to find a **verifier** as trusting relationships develop.

