



Pharmacy matters: health in the 2020s

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown how much pharmacies matter, and **Ornella Barra**, Co-Chief Operating Officer, Walgreens Boots Alliance, says we can adapt to take advantage of new opportunities...

“Every community pharmacy is on the frontline of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Once again, we have shown how important pharmacy is to our patients’ lives and why the resilience of the medicines supply chain is so important to the health of our countries.

Enormous public concern about medicines led to the huge spikes in demand we all had to cope with as Coronavirus began to spread rapidly in early March; but we have been resilient. You have responded magnificently and they – the public, the media and politicians – have noticed.

They have noticed that pharmacies kept their doors open throughout the pandemic, when most other retailers and businesses were closed, and when access to other parts of the health system became very difficult. They have noticed how we were flexible, adaptable, and willing to try new ways of working. They noticed that even as our supply chains came under sudden and enormous strain, we kept the medicines flowing to patients, where and when they needed them.

Pharmacists and pharmacy teams have rightfully taken their place among the key workers who are being praised by politicians and the public around the world for their dedication and support. We are seen as trusted guardians of people’s health and wellbeing.

As my fellow pharmacist and Co-Chief Operating Officer of WBA, **Alex Gourlay**, says: “Pharmacy matters. It matters today, it mattered yesterday, and it will matter tomorrow.”

A new beginning

Pharmacy has made great strides during the 2010s. We have introduced many new services and broken new ground with pharmacist-led vaccinations and digital innovations. There is much to be proud of.

But COVID-19 has changed how the 2020s will develop. We have seen short-term impacts such as shortages of key medicines and personal protective equipment (PPE). We know also that there will be many long-term impacts. Sharp downturns in national economies, jobs being lost and businesses closing will hit communities hard. Health systems will have to deal with long queues of patients who are still waiting for the treatments they missed during lockdown.

Our close relationships with our patients, our convenient locations, and our open doors mean that pharmacies have become a much more important source of healthcare advice during the pandemic.

We are ideally placed to support patients who want to improve their health and lifestyles in response to the negative impact that Coronavirus has had on those living with diabetes, cardiovascular diseases or obesity. We can encourage a return to vaccinations, delivering catch-up vaccines to those who have missed out and offering greater protection for patients and their loved ones against respiratory illnesses such as winter flu and pneumonia.

It is hugely encouraging that pharmacies have shown great willingness to adopt new ways of working and embrace new solutions. It is also very pleasing to see regulatory relaxations that we have been demanding for years now delivered in weeks. This has enabled valued services such as home deliveries, supplying PPE to healthcare professionals, and the use of e-prescriptions to be put in place, and in many cases funded by health systems as well.

Now is the time to build on these changes that have clearly benefited the health of the communities we serve. We must use this momentum to embed changes and seize the opportunities on offer.

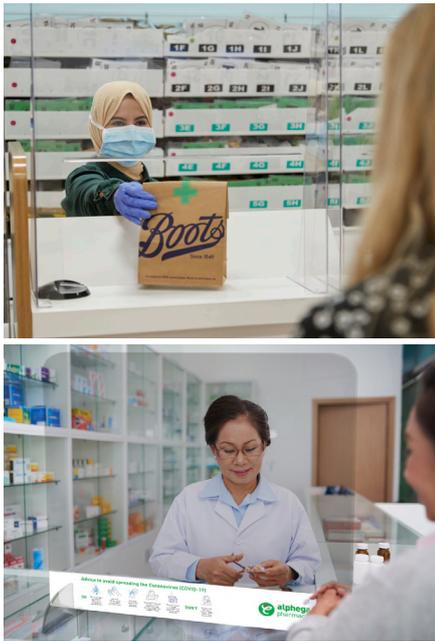
This is our opportunity to make rapid changes in the evolution of pharmacy. As consumer behaviour changes in response to the pandemic, such as with the huge rise in online shopping, we must continue to innovate to match the new expectations of our patients.. Digital offerings and ways of serving our communities remotely, with less physical contact and proximity, will all be vital.

Pharmacies have, once again, shown that they are essential to the health of local communities and to the continued functioning of local health systems. We have proved our worth and we must step forwards to claim our rewards through the opportunities this crisis now offers us.

Be bold and we will succeed.”

Ornella

COVID-19: Testimonials from the frontline of European pharmacy



New ways of working

EPF members have shared their experiences on how pharmacies have played a key role in supporting health systems and the public through the COVID-19 emergency. There has been lots of innovation and many new ways of working have emerged.

Philippe Gaertner explains that, in France, community pharmacies became the official distribution centres for PPE to all healthcare workers, cementing their role at the heart of the health system. He also expects pharmacists to be the major point of contact with the health system in future.

In Italy, **Marcello Perego** says there has been an acceleration of the e-prescription service. This has enabled pharmacists to provide medicines to patients by using a simple code. This has highlighted how patients truly value and appreciate the crucial role of pharmacists.

In Portugal, **Paulo Duarte**, EPF President, emphasised how a 24-hour call centre was established to support online deliveries and deliveries by pharmacies to patients' homes. At its peak this was taking more than 500 calls a day. Several countries have also introduced funded delivery services to support patients who are required to stay isolated at home because of their medical conditions.

Preparing for the future

It is widely hoped that the development of an effective vaccine against SARS-Cov-2 (COVID-19) will allow societies to return to more normal ways of working without the need for social distancing. To be effective, this will require millions of people to be vaccinated in every country.

Pharmacies are paving the way for this by demonstrating that they have the skills to deliver vaccines, as well as convenient locations that will help reach people where they work, shop and live.

Pharmacists in France, the United Kingdom and Portugal are able to administer winter flu vaccines. They are now gearing up for what is expected to be a crucial campaign to persuade as many people as possible to be vaccinated before the winter season starts.

“
Patients truly value and appreciate the crucial role of pharmacists
 ”

Marcello Perego, Italy

Support from wholesale

Juan Guerra, SVP and Managing Director, International Wholesale, WBA shared how Pharmaceutical Wholesalers have been pivotal in keeping medicines and other vital medical supplies moving throughout the Coronavirus pandemic. They have played a critical role in sustaining the resilience of the supply chain.

He highlighted that many colleagues working in office roles had stepped forward to help out in service centres, covering for colleagues who were ill or unable to work, and working extended shift patterns. As well as keeping medicines and PPE products flowing to community pharmacies and hospitals, wholesale has had to adapt to supply new locations, such as new emergency field hospitals set up in several countries.

Marcello Perego said that in Italy, pharmacies were preparing to offer a home delivery service using the Alpha app. The rapid spread of the virus required the team to accelerate the delivery of the service in order to provide a game-changing service that has really improved pharmacies' relationship with their customers.



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United Kingdom



Call to allow pharmacists to modify prescriptions

The Royal Pharmaceutical Society (RPS) is asking for legislation on medicines to be changed so that community pharmacists can modify prescriptions without having to contact the prescriber first. The RPS suggests that pharmacists should be allowed to amend the strength and/or formulation dispensed, or supply an equivalent generic version, for any medicine. It says this would minimise delays in supplying medicines during emergencies and shortages.

The Society has noted that such practices are already common in hospital settings in England, and have been introduced for community pharmacies in Scotland. New Serious Shortages Protocols (SSPs) were drawn up in 2019 as part of No Deal Brexit planning, but they are limited to very specific products, making them less useful in times of widespread crisis like the Coronavirus pandemic. The RPS has made its call while a new Medicines and Medical Devices Bill is making its way through Parliament.

(Source: RPS, June 2020)

France



Sales fall sharply in pharmacies

Sales in France's 21,000 pharmacies dropped sharply with an average 20% reduction in sales during lockdown. This follows a peak in sales just before the start of the lockdown period.

To compensate for the lack of footfall, many pharmacies have focused on alternative distribution channels such as home delivery and click-and-collect services, which they would like to continue after the pandemic is over.

Up to 95% of pharmacy groups have now developed solutions for online prescription ordering and other e-bookings; the first steps towards being able to offer home deliveries.

Pharmacists would also like to see the delivery of reimbursable medicines being covered by the Social Security system (on a per kilometre basis).

(Source: Les Echos and Business Insider, June 2020)

Czech Republic



Medical cannabis market expands

Since the start of the year, the Czech Republic's public health insurance has been extended to cover medical cannabis under certain conditions. Patients have been entitled to insurance coverage of 90% of the retail price for 30g of flower per month for medical use, regardless of the THC content. In exceptional cases, doctors may authorise quantities exceeding the monthly limit of 30g for reimbursement, but the limit cannot exceed 180g per month.

Although it is hoped this change could lead to significant growth for the sector, with more patients able to afford the product, there are still some hurdles to jump before the market develops in full. With government-fixed prices and confusion around e-prescription codes, there is currently a limited incentive for pharmacies to sell medical cannabis.

(Source: MBD, May 2020)

Italy



Flu vaccination to start earlier

The Ministry of Health is bringing forward the start date for administering 2020/21 influenza vaccinations to reduce the chances of the co-circulation of winter flu with the COVID-19 virus.

They now want flu vaccinations to be available from early October to prevent the spread of the flu and to help avoid putting additional pressures on the health system.

A new information campaign will encourage the uptake of flu vaccines among high-risk population groups of all ages. Flu vaccinations are offered free-of-charge to people most at risk of complications.

While Italian pharmacists are not allowed to administer vaccines themselves, nurses can administer vaccines in community pharmacies with the pharmacies providing the products.

(Source: IHS, June 2020)

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Turkey



Millions of masks distributed by pharmacists

Pharmacies in Turkey are playing a vital role in helping to reduce the spread of Coronavirus by distributing free masks to the public.

Over 55 million masks were distributed to pharmacies as part of the Turkish government's programme of action, according to the Turkish Pharmacists' Association.

The production of masks has significantly increased since the first case of Coronavirus was identified in the country at the beginning of March. At that time, Turkey was producing around 500,000 masks per day. This has now reached 12 million masks per day. The Pharmacists' Association says that more than 40 million masks have been handed out to pharmacy customers free of charge so far.

(Source: IHN, June 2020)

Portugal



Petition to ensure the sustainability of pharmacies

A petition calling for guarantees on the sustainability of the country's network of pharmacies has been signed by more than 120,000 citizens (more than 1% of the population), forcing a debate by the Portuguese Assembly of the Republic.

The petition is also supported by dozens of patient associations and groups representing doctors, nurses, dentists and pharmacists. It calls for more government support for pharmacies in order to maintain equality of access to health services across the country, better remuneration for the services delivered by the pharmacists, and better access to medicines for patients. The petition also recommends that services delivered in pharmacies are promoted better. These include dispensing cancer and HIV medicines and influenza vaccinations. Almost a quarter of Portuguese pharmacies were reported to be facing insolvency before the COVID-19 crisis.

(Source: Portuguese Parliament, May 2020)

Germany



Greater safeguards demanded under new e-prescription law

Pharmacists in Germany are demanding greater protections ahead of electronic prescriptions being introduced in 2022.

The Federal Union of German Associations of Pharmacists (ABDA) is calling for a review of the Patient Data Protection Act to ensure that prescription information is not disclosed to third-party providers, something not covered by current regulations. ABDA is also calling for clearer legal requirements for non-German online pharmacies, and particularly for those operating in the European Economic Area.

It has asked the government to specify what parts of German pharmacy and pharmaceutical laws online vendors from outside Germany will have to follow when selling medicines. It is expected that the implementation of electronic prescription will lead to a significant boost.

(Source: IHS Markit and ABDA, June 2020)

Spain



Low earners exempted from medicines co-payments

Financially struggling families are now exempted from co-payments for pharmacy dispensed medicines following the adoption of a "minimum income guarantee scheme" by the Spanish government.

According to government estimates, the new scheme will benefit approximately 850,000 households, covering about 2.3 million people.

Currently, the working population pay between 40% and 60% of the retail price for medicines depending on their income. There are some exceptions to this policy, such as people who receive treatment for a work-related health condition or low-income pensioners living in the Canary Islands.

(Source: IHS, June 2020)

Romania



One-third would refuse COVID-19 vaccine

One in three Romanians would refuse to be vaccinated against COVID-19 in any circumstances, according to a survey conducted in May by the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy (IRES).

According to the survey, four in 10 said that they would accept a vaccine, once it has been tested and approved. Vaccine hesitancy is increasing in Romania, fuelled by the growing visibility of the anti-vaccine movement in the country. The percentage of Romanians who receive vaccinations has fallen by between 10 and 15 percent since 2009. Similar trends have been seen in France, Germany and Italy.

(Source: IHN, May 2020)

The Netherlands



New medicines consultation service approved

A new pharmaceutical consultation service that allows patients to access private advice and guidance on their medicines has been approved by the Dutch Health Care Authority, Nederlandse Zorgautoriteit. It aims to help patients who, for example, struggle to understand their medication, experience side effects and would like to discuss alternatives, or those who want to talk to a pharmacist before starting a new medicine.

These conversations can take place digitally, or by telephone in the pharmacy, and health insurers will pay pharmacies for providing this new service. This marks the next step in reimbursement of health services in Dutch pharmacies.

(Source: Nederlandse Zorgautoriteit, June 2020)