



Future-proofing the role of the pharmacist

Pharmacies have shown how they can adapt to new ways of working, says **Ornella Barra**, Co-Chief Operating Officer, Walgreens Boots Alliance. By doing so, pharmacists will secure themselves a future after the pandemic...

“With many parts of Europe re-entering lockdowns to control COVID-19 outbreaks, pharmacy is showing once again that it is at the heart of accessible healthcare. Pharmacy doors remain open - an even more welcome sight in the depths of winter - and pharmacy healthcare professionals are rightly recognised as essential workers.

Pharmacy has adapted rapidly to new challenges, and pharmacists have shown how much they can do to support patients when access to other services are restricted. Looking ahead, we see how pharmacy will be able to play a more active role in providing local healthcare, by offering preventative public health services, supporting patients suffering from ongoing symptoms of COVID-19 – often referred to as “long-COVID” – and taking part in testing and vaccination systems.

This is our chance to consolidate the extra efforts pharmacy teams have made during this unprecedented year, as well as the dedication pharmacists have shown to do the best for their patients. We can pave the way for a stronger future for pharmacies in the communities we serve, and in the health systems that everyone relies on.

People are wanting more from their local pharmacies. At a time when it is increasingly difficult to see a doctor due to closed-door

policies, and with many appointments moving towards online systems in place of face-to-face consultations, pharmacies have become a preferred choice for advice and healthcare. Personal and accessible, pharmacies are a trusted service for peoples’ health, prescription and wellbeing needs. Not only are they more interested in self-care, but new categories are emerging in personal care, such as sanitisers, masks and vitamin top-ups, alongside support for mental health and better sleep.

There has also been a record level of demand for influenza vaccinations this season. In markets where pharmacists are able to administer flu vaccines, pharmacy teams have responded incredibly, and we continue to see vaccination pilot schemes being extended in many countries. We have always said that delivering flu vaccinations is the gateway to other extended services, now including the large-scale COVID-19 vaccination programmes that health systems are embarking on. Pharmacists can play a crucial role in supporting this, from signposting and explaining the benefits, through to vaccine delivery and administration.

It has become clear that COVID-19 has a greater impact on patients with pre-existing conditions and poor underlying health. Preventative programmes to improve the health of the population are crucial to reducing future

problems as health systems struggle to return to normal levels of activity.

With their locations in the community and ready access to people who do not consider themselves to be ill, pharmacies can expand the range of screening services they already offer. Being the first point of contact for advice and reassurance, pharmacy’s deep-rooted strength and source of trust means we can encourage our customers not to ignore any early or unusual symptoms, and can help them seek urgent treatment for more serious conditions.

Now more than ever, pharmacies need to adapt to the new world. With strong competition anticipated from Amazon Pharmacy, this is a moment to remind us all, once again, of the importance of listening closely to what our customers and patients want, transforming our offer and providing our patients with unparalleled pharmacy, health and wellbeing experiences.

In this way we will continue to be successful, demonstrating our value and how pharmacy and pharmacists will be even more at the centre of the healthcare system - paving the way for a stronger future.”

Ornella



United Kingdom



Record demand for flu vaccinations in pharmacies

Community pharmacies in England administered more flu vaccines in the first two months of this season than they did during the whole of winter last year, responding to a massive increase in demand from customers concerned about the COVID-19 pandemic. By the end of October 2020, pharmacies had administered more than 1.76 million flu vaccines, surpassing the 1.72 million delivered between September 2019 and February 2020. Their busiest day saw a record 73,500 vaccinations administered.

The UK government, which encouraged take-up of the vaccine, has extended eligibility for a free vaccination to more at-risk groups, ordering additional stocks that can also be used to treat the 50-64 age group. With governments preparing to administer the forthcoming COVID-19 vaccines as soon as they are approved, pharmacies are now well placed to help, especially when more vaccine stocks become available in early 2021.

(Source: PSNC, October 2020)

France



Rapid antigen testing administered in French pharmacies

The French government has allowed pharmacists to administer rapid antigen testing for COVID-19. The new test, which uses a nasopharyngeal swab, detects proteins created by the virus and provides results in under 30 minutes. To perform the test, the pharmacist needs to be equipped with personal protective equipment and the patient must be able to sit down.

Eligible patients must be 65 or under; be asymptomatic or have symptoms that started a few days before; not be considered high-risk; unable to get the result of a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test within 48 hours; and have not been identified as part of a cluster or contact case. If the rapid antigen test is positive, the patient must get a PCR test to confirm the diagnosis. The full cost of the service is around 35 EUR.

(Source: Les Journal des Femmes Santé, November 2020)

Spain



Manifesto to support vaccination in pharmacies

The Spanish General Council of Pharmacists (CGCOF) published a manifesto asking the government to give pharmacies a bigger role in the primary care system. As with other countries, pharmacists have been on the frontline supporting patients during the pandemic and have demonstrated that they should be better integrated in the healthcare network.

CGCOF is also asking the government to allow pharmacies to take part in the strategies and programmes implemented for the screening, prevention and early detection of COVID-19, including the registration and notification of cases. Additionally, the Council believes that pharmacists should be trained to perform rapid COVID-19 testing, as well as in administering COVID-19 and flu vaccinations, in line with other countries. At the very least, pharmacies should be used as a location for other healthcare professionals to vaccinate.

(Source: Portal Farma, September 2020)

Italy



Report shows that the role of pharmacy during the pandemic has been fundamental

A report on the role of pharmacies and their relationship with patients and consumers during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was published by the civic movement Cittadinanzattiva in collaboration with the Pharmacist Association Federfarma, highlights that Italian pharmacists played a key role in supporting the population throughout the pandemic.

From the start of the crisis, pharmacists were on the frontline helping to combat the spread of the virus. Now, the report calls on institutions to rely more on pharmacists to support the primary care system by administering antigen testing and vaccines, including flu and anti-pneumococcal. It also recommends that pharmacies are allowed to dispense drugs that are usually supplied by public hospitals.

(Source: Federfarma, November 2020)

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The Netherlands



New ruling restricts medicines sold by supermarket pharmacies

The Administrative Jurisdiction Division of the Council of State has ruled that supermarkets must have an assistant chemist in store to sell certain types of over-the-counter medicines (UAD), such as higher than usual doses of paracetamol and ibuprofen.

The concept of 'remote pharmacy' and a 'remote chemist', which can provide information to customers via a telephone or video call, are considered unlawful and a violation of the Dutch Medicines Act. If policymakers want to make remote consultation possible for the sale of UAD, they will need to amend the Act accordingly. This ruling will impact the retail stores selling UAD medicines.

(Source: KNMP, November 2020)

Czech Republic



Czech scouts help pharmacies

Czech Scout association, Junák, launched a special programme called 'Scout Assistance to Pharmacies', which provides support to patients who need assistance in picking up their medication from their local pharmacy.

With the supervision of the Czech Chamber of Pharmacists (ČLnK), the project allows scout volunteers to deliver medicines and medical devices to patients who cannot receive support from relatives. Medication is picked up directly by trained scout volunteers who have been given the necessary instructions and information by the pharmacist. The service is both free of charge and accessible nationwide.

(Source: Česká Lékárnická Komora, November 2020)

Germany



New VOASG law provides a clearer regulatory framework for German pharmacies

On October 29, the German Bundestag passed the Pharmacy Strengthening Act, with the ambition of strengthening the role of local pharmacies and the sustainable supply of medicine. As well as restoring the nationwide price control for prescription medicines, the law will also introduce new pharmaceutical services for patients with statutory health insurance, and establish a 2.50 EUR delivery fee paid by health insurers to support local pharmacy delivery services.

The law also creates a framework for fair competition by establishing a unique pharmacy retail price for prescription products sold by national and foreign mail-order pharmacies. The latter will also need to comply with similar transport requirements as national wholesalers when dispatching medicinal products. ABDA, the Federal Association of German Pharmacists' Associations, has welcomed the new law as it believes the VOASG provides pharmacies with clearer regulations and more certainty over their future.

(Source: ABDA, October 2020)

Portugal



Record demand for flu vaccination cannot be met

On the first day of the vaccination season, pharmacies faced unprecedented demand and broke the record for dispensing flu vaccines. 67,000 patients were vaccinated by pharmacists, with demand reaching 21% higher than the previous year.

However, this upward trend was shortly reversed, as data showed that the initial stock of vaccines for pharmacies depleted rapidly and was not enough to meet the exponential demand. By the end of October, 234,000 patients had been vaccinated in pharmacies, which represented 64,000 fewer people than in 2019. Although a second supply of 210,000 vaccines is due in the second half of November, this will unlikely be enough to meet requirements.

(Source: Revista Saúde, November 2020)

Turkey



Lack of flu vaccines aggravated by the pandemic

The Turkish Pharmacists' Union has warned that current supplies of flu vaccines will not meet this year's high demand. The union stated that approximately 10 million vaccine doses are still needed, while vaccine supplier companies explained that only around 1.5 million doses have been ordered to be delivered by the end of October. It added that supplies of flu vaccines were insufficient last year and that the situation has been aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The surge in demand for flu vaccines in Turkey is in line with an increased demand globally. This is due to anticipation of a prolonged COVID-19 pandemic, and a two-pronged threat for at-risk groups. The country also remains dependent on imports to meet domestic flu vaccine demand, despite government efforts to increase local production of biological health products.

(Source: IHS Markit, October 2020)

Romania



OTC medicine sales rise during pandemic

Pharmacies in Romania saw a rise of up to 9.3% in the sale of non-prescription medicines throughout the year until September 2020. This was largely due to the impacts of the Coronavirus on shopping patterns.

However, sales of prescription medicines fell by 10.4% in the same period, with the overall consumption of medicines dropping 2.1% in volume and 4% in value terms, falling to RON 17.4bn (3.66bn EUR) at distribution prices. The changes are attributed to patients being more cautious about going out during the pandemic period.

(Source: Romania Insider, November 2020)

Highlights from the third EPF meeting of 2020

The European Pharmacists Forum met virtually on October 1, 2020, bringing together leading pharmacists and guest speakers from across Europe. The forum addressed key issues affecting the industry during the pandemic and highlighted the vital work of pharmacies.

J. Walker Smith (Chief Knowledge Officer, Kantar) presented a study on consumer behavioural changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the main consequences has been a renewed desire for human and social interactions. Consumers have also increased their reliance on e-commerce and digital services, however, anything linked to in-person social interactions will last long after the crisis period has passed. The study also shared that consumers have become more risk averse when it comes to making purchases; so reassurance, expertise and accessibility of products and services will be important factors in the future. The final trend is the greater importance placed on the public's health and safety, with predictions that many of the measures put in place as a result of the pandemic will become permanent features in all countries. Going forward, the public will demand companies play a greater role in improving society.

Elisabeth Araujo (Western Europe Managing Director, L'Oréal) said L'Oréal had concentrated on remaining agile in its relationship with pharmacy partners. The company has also invested heavily in reacting to trends in consumer behaviour. She concluded with prospects for 2021, highlighting agility and adaptability as key, and stating the need for partnerships with pharmacies and strengthening the link between online and offline business dimensions.

Paulo Duarte (President, EPF) said that pharmacies have been delivering more than consumers expected during the pandemic and will emerge stronger. In Portugal, pharmacies were the only healthcare service available throughout the healthcare crisis. They guaranteed patients' access to specialist medicines while offering many new services, including partnering with L'Oréal to produce an online purchasing platform. Mr Duarte said pharmacists will have to face four future



challenges: remuneration for services, including vaccinations, COVID-19 testing and specialty medicines dispensing. However, the individual must stay at the heart of pharmacist's activities.

Tricia Kennerley (VP, Director, International Public Affairs, WBA) highlighted the rapid growth in online consultations in pharmacies and how some German pharmacies are offering flu vaccinations for the first time. Where permitted, pharmacies are preparing to be ready to offer COVID-19 antigen and antibody testing. She gave an update on Brexit, expressing the hope that an agreement is reached before the UK leaves the European Union on December 31. She warned of the serious consequences for the pharmaceutical sector should an agreement not be reached over the Northern Ireland border, and spoke on the issue of the Falsified Medicine Directive, which will no longer apply to the UK post-Brexit, but will continue to be applicable in Northern Ireland.

Ornella Barra (Chief Operating Officer, WBA) announced Stefano Pessina's intention to relinquish the CEO role and replace James Skinner as WBA Executive Chairman. James Standley has been appointed President of Walgreens. In June, WBA announced a new stage in its strategic partnership with Microsoft and Adobe, which aims to improve customer experience. In July, Walgreens announced their partnership with VillageMD to offer healthcare centres in stores. She also acknowledged Guoda's

leading role in fighting COVID-19.

Juan Guerra (Managing Director, International Wholesale) reported that Alliance Healthcare Norway renewed its contract as sole supplier of hospital pharmacies. Laurent Bendavid is the new Managing Director of Alliance Healthcare France and has been elected President of the French Wholesalers Association (CSRP). In Turkey, Alliance Healthcare's recently launched loyalty program and online ordering platform has secured 8,500 pharmacists and 23 manufacturers as active members. In Spain, a new training platform for pharmacists has been created (Alliance Healthcare Academy). He commended the many new initiatives launched by Alphega, including: the MyHospital platform in Spain focusing on telemedicine, Romania's campaign to support patients living with dementia and the UK's support for mental health through the charity ACTNow. He also reported on charity support by Alphega Romania and UK, which focuses on dementia carers and mental health.

Ornella Barra shared how Walgreens surpassed one million COVID-19 tests by mid-September, and highlighted its drive to increase capacity, which is echoed by Boots in the UK. Ms Barra said WBA's ambition is to capitalise on its experience to be ready for when a vaccine is available. WBA is the largest private vaccinator in the world, and the Group's pharmacists can inoculate in the US, UK, Republic of Ireland, Norway, France, Portugal and Mexico. WBA has unique expertise in immunizations. She closed by highlighting Boots UK's charity partnerships with Hestia (a charity offering safe spaces for victims of domestic abuse) and The Hygiene Bank, as well as Walgreen's continued partnership with Vitamin Angels. Ms Barra said she was positive about the future of UK pharmacies, and said it was time to ensure that the incredible services pharmacies offer are recognized.



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