

Community Pharmacists Supporting Healthcare Systems: Lessons Learned from the COVID-19 Crisis



Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, the network of pharmacies near people's homes has been playing a vital role in supporting local communities and ensuring their continued access to treatments and care. Community pharmacists have been accessible 24/7, even during lockdowns, and have been the first line of advice, treatment, and referral for many people in Europe on common ailments, successfully preventing unnecessary visits to emergency rooms.

Community pharmacists make an invaluable contribution to the health of over 500 million people across Europe and they are ready to further help strengthening health systems.



The pandemic should be seen as a wake-up call and an opportunity to improve preparedness and response of healthcare systems to current and future health challenges. For [community pharmacy](#), COVID-19 has shown the need to:

-  Maximise the benefits of the community pharmacist's intervention for patients and healthcare system through systematically undertaking and supporting sustainable **pharmacy services** which bring value both to patients and healthcare systems.
-  Support community pharmacists, as trusted sources of health information, to help progress the safe **digitalisation of healthcare** while maintaining their invaluable personal connection with patients.
-  Reduce the burden of **medicine shortages** on patients and healthcare professionals.

“Crisis situations like the coronavirus epidemic can provide opportunities to change the traditional roles of different health care providers and expand the roles of some providers like nurses and pharmacists, so that they can take on some of the tasks from doctors and thereby allow them to spend their time more effectively on the most complex cases.”

OECD

Did you know?

180.000 pharmacies

in Europe* are the people's first point of contact with the healthcare system, available 24/7 without an appointment.

Almost 2/3 of EU citizens

can reach their nearest community pharmacy within five minutes, while 98% can do so within 30 minutes.

3 245 citizens

a community pharmacy serves on average in Europe*.



Read more [here](#).

* Calculated on 32 PGEU [member countries](#).

Pharmacy Services

The pandemic has highlighted the fragilities of health care systems and the need to rethink the way care is provided. It is necessary to move from a hospital-centered care to a patient-centered care, monitoring and treating patients as close to their home as possible. Inter-professional collaboration and increased investment in disease prevention and health promotion measures are also key to improve health outcomes.

As such, many European countries have already introduced changes in legislation to expand the role of pharmacists and relieve pressure on the rest of the healthcare system. Some countries have also secured additional funds to empower pharmacists in their vital work on the frontline.

Community pharmacists deliver patient care services at all stages of the medication journey whilst working at the heart of local communities. This involves performing a patient's needs assessment, initiating new therapies, adjusting or discontinuing treatment following consultation with the prescriber, providing support in managing chronic conditions and ensuring effective and safe self-care. Increasingly, they are also providing a wide range of public health services such as health screening and promotion, vaccination and smoking cessation.

A [European-wide mapping study](#) found that out of 38 pharmacy services provided across 32 European countries, 31 different pharmacy services are currently reimbursed by the government or the health care payer outside the standard pharmacy dispensing remuneration across Europe.

Key lessons



Define **new models of care delivery** which involve and stimulate multi-professionals' teams working seamlessly, and which move from hospital-centered care to patient-centered care, treating patients as close to their home as possible.



Establish **adequate regulatory frameworks** for pharmacy services which demonstrate their potential in improving therapy outcomes and adherence, minimising the risks related to using medicines, improving public health, guaranteeing access to treatments and ensuring an effective and safe self-care.



Ensure that **remuneration** for community pharmacists properly reflects their contribution to improving pharmaceutical care, reducing the burden on other health services and supporting the sustainability and resilience of European health systems.



Read more [here](#).

Did you know?

17 pharmacy interventions

had expanded powers granted to pharmacists in 16 European countries during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 11 European countries pharmacists perform structured **evaluations** of patient's medicines to optimise medication use and improve health outcomes (Medication Review).

In 10 European countries pharmacists administer **vaccines** in pharmacies to people.

In 6 European countries community pharmacists have been granted the opportunity to **renew repeat prescriptions** for chronic medications.

In 6 European countries healthcare systems have granted expanded powers to community pharmacists in relation to dispensing and administering **flu vaccinations**.

In 5 European countries community pharmacists have been granted extended powers to **dispense certain medicines** which before were only accessible via hospitals.

In 4 European countries home delivery services performed by European pharmacists on a daily basis were better recognised following the pandemic.

Medicine Shortages

The COVID-19 crisis has tested Europe's medicine supply chains like never before and has placed access to medicines and medical equipment on the top of EU and national policy makers' agendas.

However, the unavailability of medicines is still on the rise in Europe and community pharmacists are very concerned about this phenomenon, which can compromise patients' health. Moreover, pharmacists invest significant human and economic resources dealing with shortages which constitutes a loss of opportunity to spend time with other patient-centred tasks and to improve the quality of care.

Key lessons



Expand the **scope of pharmacy practice** when medicines are in short supply, so that pharmacists can use their skills and knowledge to better manage patient care and ensure continuity of treatment.



Ensure **increased transparency and timely communication** on shortages to affected stakeholders, including pharmacists and patients.



Structurally involve **pharmacy organisations** in strategies related to the monitoring, prevention and management of shortages.



Read more [here](#).

Did you know?



In 6 EU Countries

community pharmacists have been granted the opportunity to provide **alternative solutions** for occurring medicine shortages during the COVID-19 pandemic.



In 4 EU Countries

community pharmacies have participated in an EU-funded project to explore the value of exchanging **comparable information on shortages** which shows automatic and real-time notification by community pharmacists is key to comprehend the actual availability of medicines at patient level and to develop an early detection capacity to avoid or mitigate supply problems.



65%

of national pharmacy organisations across Europe have reported that **medicine shortages continued to get worse** in 2020 compared with 2019.



6.3 hours per week

on average pharmacy staff spend **dealing with medicine shortages**.

Solutions that can be legally offered by pharmacists in case of a shortage (% of responding countries):

80.77% Generic substitution (21/26)

50.00% Importing the medicine from another country (13/26)

46.15% Sourcing the same medicine from alternative authorised sources (12/26)

42.31% Preparing a compounded formulation (11/26)

34.61% Changing to the same medicine with a different strength (9/26)

23.08% Therapeutic substitution (6/26)



Read more [here](#).

Digital Health

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the digital transformation in healthcare. Also community pharmacies have rapidly expanded digital services to patients due to the fact that many vulnerable patients were not able to physically visit their local pharmacy.

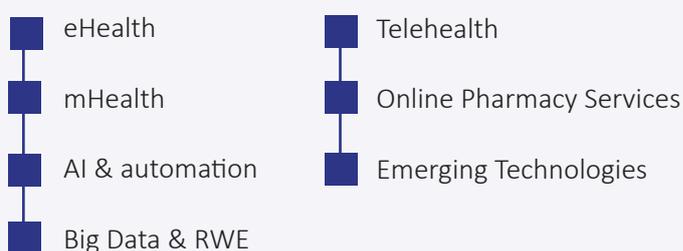
Community pharmacists have always been at the forefront of digitalisation, taking up medication record, third-party payer solutions and the like to serve patients better. The use of digital health solutions, big data, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and automation can make pharmacy processes more efficient, making it easier to implement added-value services and allowing community pharmacists to follow up with at-risk patients and monitor their progress during therapy. Moreover, digital health solutions have a great potential to promote more collaboration across different healthcare professionals serving the same patients as well as to promote integration of primary care systems.

Community pharmacists are an accessible and trusted sources of information. They are ideally placed to play a pivotal role in designing, developing, testing, implementing and ensuring the uptake of new digital health innovations, complementing their face-to-face relationships with patients.

Ongoing key legislative initiatives at European level, including the creation of the European Health Data Space and the Digital Services Act, will be instrumental to create an adequate framework on digital health which:

- ✓ Creates trust in the use and re-use of data in healthcare by all stakeholders.
- ✓ Safeguards consumer protection and patients' safety for the cross-border online provision of medicines and digital health services within the EU Single Market.
- ✓ Improves outcomes for patients and health systems in such a way that it does not prevail over direct human contact, nor cause digital exclusion.

Pharmacy



Key lessons

Support community pharmacists, as trusted sources of health information, to help progress the safe digitalisation of healthcare while maintaining their invaluable personal connection with patients by:

-  Enabling pharmacists to access and update **shared electronic health records** and integrate **real-world data** in their daily practice, respecting data protection.
-  Adequately **rewarding pharmacists' continuous investment** in digital health infrastructures and **remunerating community pharmacy services** in the area of digital health.
-  **Engaging with healthcare professionals**, including community pharmacists, as experienced end-users to develop digital health policies and services at local, regional or national levels as appropriate to ensure that they are fit-for-practice.



Read more [here](#).

