



COVID-19 and the Community Pharmacist

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I am an experienced community pharmacist working for a large pharmacy multiple and this is an account of my experience of working as a pharmacist during the coronavirus pandemic.

Like most of the country, back in March, the community pharmacy sector was initially caught off guard and were ill prepared to combat the national health emergency that was at our doorstep. Looking back now, one could argue that lockdown was too slow and that there was a lack of preparation, support or leadership for the NHS. Even before the government finally did acknowledge the severity of covid-19 and initiated lockdown, GP surgeries had started closing their doors to protect their teams and the public. This started to increase pressure on pharmacies as we were the only immediately accessible NHS healthcare professionals left on the high street. This was shortly coupled with a surge in requests of items such as hand sanitizers, face masks and thermometers, reduced staffing levels due to members of the pharmacy team going into isolation, more medical queries and increased prescription volumes. Towards the start of the pandemic there were numerous cases where a member of the public would present in a pharmacy with symptoms of coronavirus potentially putting the pharmacy team at risk themselves and forcing temporary closure for a deep clean.

All this created an unprecedented strain on the average community pharmacy. I was initially based in a shopping centre pharmacy where we typically provided an array of pharmacy services such as travel clinics and some childhood vaccination

services but all these close contact services were suspended to minimise risk to both patients and pharmacists. Demand of this particular pharmacy went down and fell due to suspension of most of our clinics and the closure of the vast majority of shops within the centre. In contrast, the demand of most other pharmacies based on the high street, grew exponentially. Therefore, the



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company made the centralised decision to temporarily close the pharmacy in which I was based and redeploy pharmacists and most pharmacy assistants to other busier pharmacies which were struggling to keep up with demand. Although it was a worrying time for me to be redeployed to other pharmacies, I knew it was the right decision and I wanted to go and make a difference out there in the pharmacies that were struggling. In most of the pharmacies that were open, it was sometimes difficult to

balance all the factors mentioned as well as still provide services such as supervised methadone consumption and emergency hormonal contraception clinics to ensure these patients do not fall through the cracks.

However, the main challenge was to continue to prioritise patients whilst also balancing the protection of ourselves and our pharmacy teams.

I am fortunate enough to work for a large pharmacy multiple whose support, proactive approach and infrastructure has made all the difference. Overall, we were able to respond relatively quickly to the pandemic and were able to source personal protective equipment (PPE) to pharmacy teams and produce protective perspex screens to enhance safety.

Not all pharmacies have been as fortunate and struggled to initially source PPE for their pharmacy teams. Even several months later, community pharmacies were not included in initial government online PPE ordering systems like GP surgeries, when one could argue that pharmacy teams are more at risk. This is particularly worrying with deaths of fellow pharmacists and pharmacy team members during the pandemic. Most community pharmacies must source their own PPE resulting in further financial strain on the sector.

In March, towards the start of the pandemic, I contracted a cough and was in isolation for two weeks. There was no covid-19 testing at the time so I was unable to confirm whether I had the virus or not and therefore had to remain off work. Like for many healthcare professionals, this was an incredibly

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The Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain shared the same view and were compelled to write to the health secretary Matt Hancock regarding “the lack of recognition, support and encouragement from the Government for the fantastic work pharmacy is doing”.

The profession is now slowly getting its rightful recognition and are able to shop during NHS priority hours, receive death in service benefits and regular government mention. Most of our patients have always been grateful for the relentless work that pharmacy teams have been undertaking and it is now rewarding to have that national government recognition too. Hopefully this will carry on where pharmacy will be remembered for its tireless fight against this pandemic on the frontline, right from the very start. As a profession, we are not always the best at “shouting about” our achievements but now is the time. Community pharmacy must build on this, keeping our voice heard and seek further opportunities in a safe manner and secure funding after this. The world will never be the same again but I am optimistic that the valuable work we have done during this time will cement our future role within the NHS for many years to come.

an incredibly frustrating time for me as I knew that our teams were becoming depleted and it was becoming increasingly difficult to keep every pharmacy open to serve each community.

Both the NHS and our company gave pharmacists professional autonomy at a local level which means that we could temporarily close our stores if we needed to in order to conduct a deep clean or catch up on dispensing and checking tasks. Also, we limit the number of patients that can enter a store to help maintain social distancing. Most of our pharmacies are now back to opening full contracted NHS hours but it is good to know that we have the backing of the company and the NHS if we deem it necessary to close in times of extreme pressure or public safety.

Towards the start of the pandemic, I did feel there was very little recognition of pharmacists and their teams. Initially, each government speech thanked doctors and nurses but there was no mention of pharmacists or their teams. In the past, pharmacists have gotten fairly used to a lack of recognition for our tireless NHS work. However with the vastly increased workload and added risks to ourselves and our families that comes with remaining open to the public, dispensing NHS prescriptions and delivering crucial NHS services, this time we had to be heard. To add to the frustration, there were several cases where pharmacists were being refused NHS worker priority shopping hours by supermarkets. Enough was enough.

Hope by Anurag Sharma

Those who held frightened hands
those who wiped a father's brow
those who sat as a mother cried
those who wept right there
where we were not allowed.

Those who rushed into battle
those who worked tirelessly
those who found a way
those who struggled through a day
when we could have ours.

Those who suffered sleepless nights
those who will never forget
those who stood with their comrades
those who did what they had to do
how could we ever thank you enough?
Those who kept the light lit
those who lost their lives
those whom they left behind
from their ultimate sacrifice.

To everyone of those people
who kept a roof above us
as the world collapsed
you gave us hope
and reminded us all
that there are such things
as heroes