

Expanding the Front-Line Response: Recognizing the Role of Community Pharmacists in Responding to COVID-19

Introduction

On April 8, 2020, the Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health issued new guidance under the Public Readiness and Emergency Preparedness Act (PREPA) authorizing licensed pharmacists to order and administer COVID-19 tests. In a prepared statement, HHS Secretary Alex Azar underscored the significant role that pharmacists could play in preventing, detecting, and responding to COVID-19, saying, “Giving pharmacists the authorization to order and administer COVID-19 tests to their patients means easier access to testing for Americans who need it. Pharmacists play a vital role in delivering convenient access to important public health services and information.¹”

By authorizing licensed pharmacists the ability to engage in COVID-19 testing, HHS has expanded the role that these frontline workers can play in the current public health crisis. More can be done, however, to ensure that pharmacists are performing to the scope of their practice and thus relieve pressures on other areas of the health care system. This essay will use the U.S. healthcare system as a case study to highlight roles and activities that community pharmacists can undertake in public health crises, and conclude with policy recommendations to further enhance their role. In doing so, this essay hopes to inform future decisions around the restructuring of existing health services by policy makers and public health bodies in response to public health crises such as COVID-19.

The Role of the Pharmacy

Pharmacists are among the nation’s most accessible healthcare professionals: 90% of Americans living within 5 miles of a community pharmacy, and nearly 80% of Americans receive their prescription benefits through a pharmacy benefit manager². They are best known for their ability to fill prescriptions and manage potentially complex medication regimes, suggesting methods for accurately and effectively taking medications, discussing medication safety, identifying side effects, and managing chronic health conditions. While lesser known, pharmacists are also extensively trained to provide basic health care services such as providing vaccinations and basic screenings, as well as advising on over-the-counter (OTC) remedies for common ailments that do not warrant a physician’s visit.

Role in COVID Response

There is a precedent for meaningfully engaging pharmacists during a pandemic response. There is national guidance already developed that outlines the role that pharmacists can play in responding to various types of disasters, such a Delphi consensus study undertaken after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 across four phases of the disaster: Prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery³. In addition, robust evidence exists on the impact pharmacists may have in responding to public health crises. During the previous H1N1 pandemic in 2009, for instance, it was estimated that pharmacists could reduce the time to achieve 80% single-dose vaccine coverage nationally by 7 weeks⁴.

Already, in response to COVID-19, the International Pharmaceutical Federation has published interim guidelines⁵ for the pharmacy workforce that outline the key activities which form part of

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. “HHS Statements on Authorizing Licensed Pharmacists to Order and Administer COVID-19 Tests.” *HHS.gov*, US Department of Health and Human Services, 8 Apr. 2020, www.hhs.gov/about/news/2020/04/08/hhs-statements-on-authorizing-licensed-pharmacists-to-order-and-administer-covid-19-tests.html.

² Chiara, Ashley. “The Expanding Role of Pharmacists: A Positive Shift for Health Care.” *The Expanding Role of Pharmacists: A Positive Shift for Health Care*, 26 Mar. 2019, comm.ed.umassmed.edu/blog/2019/03/26/expanding-role-pharmacists-positive-shift-health-care.

³ Watson KE, Singleton JA, Tippett V, Nissen LM (2019) Defining pharmacists' roles in disasters: A Delphi study. *PLoS ONE* 14(12): e0227132. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0227132>

⁴ Schwertmann, Joy, et al. “Evaluating the Impact of Pharmacies on Pandemic Influenza Vaccine Administration: Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness.” *Cambridge Core*, Cambridge University Press, 21 Feb. 2017, www.cambridge.org/core/journals/disaster-medicine-and-public-health-preparedness/article/evaluating-the-impact-of-pharmacies-on-pandemic-influenza-vaccine-administration/E216D8FC9C93DC8948C529C5080E98CA.

⁵ *Information and Interim Guidance for Pharmacists and the Pharmacy Workforce*. International Pharmaceutical Federation, 19 Mar. 2020.

pharmacists' professional responsibility during the current pandemic. Listed across four key disaster phases, this guidance illuminates the current services that pharmacists are authorized to perform under state and federal policies:

- **Prevention:** Provide factual and reliable information on the disease and symptoms; educate the public on infection control and preventive measures to reduce transmission, implement infection control measures
- **Preparedness:** Maintain continuity of pharmacy services, including supplies of essential medications and other products; assist local and national management teams in ensuring a coordinated health system response
- **Response:** Implement referral pathways for any suspected cases; facilitate continued supply of OTC medications to patients; assist in dealing with any supply shortages
- **Recovery:** Re-establish normal working services and stock levels; identify and prioritize the care of vulnerable patient groups; update relevant patient records and ensure that patients have valid prescriptions on file

Recommendations

While current policies allow pharmacists to provide the services above, they can go further in empowering pharmacists to fully and effectively support the U.S. in responding to COVID-19 and to help ensure patients get the care they need. Recommendations, supported by the American Association of the College of Pharmacies, are listed below⁶:

- **Authorize full test-treat-immunize continuum:** HHS should build upon the April 8, 2020 PREPA guidance by expanding state pharmacists immunization authority to include all FDA approved vaccines, including the forthcoming novel vaccine for COVID-19
- **Ease operational barriers to address workforce and workflow issues:** State boards of pharmacies should allow pharmacists and pharmacy technicians with valid licenses to operate across state lines, and expand use of telepharmacy so that they can conduct routine pharmacy tasks (e.g. prescription data entry and script verification) remotely as necessary
- **Address shortages:** State boards of pharmacies should authorize pharmacists to conduct therapeutic interchange and substitution without physician authorization, when product shortages arise, to alleviate staffing pressures in health care facilities, in conjunction with FDA supply chain predictions.
- **Reimburse for services and remove barriers:** Payers should provide coverage for services delivered by pharmacists, including covering home and mail delivery, to ensure access to testing, treatment, and other services for patients without adequate access to services.

The global spread of COVID-19 is placing unprecedented demands on healthcare services, requiring innovative and adaptive methods of practicing public health and healthcare. By expanding authorizations for pharmacists, policymakers can more fully utilize their skills and presence as the most accessible health care provider to better respond to COVID-19 in the U.S.

⁶ "Pharmacist Advocacy Groups Call for New Action to Enhance COVID-19 Patient Care." *AACP*, www.aacp.org/article/pharmacist-advocacy-groups-call-new-action-enhance-covid-19-patient-care