

October 2020

Community Pharmacy Briefing for MPs: Flu, COVID-19 and winter pressures

Community pharmacies have provided a lifeline for local communities during the COVID-19 pandemic and they are working under huge pressure as we move into the winter months, including coping with increasing demand for flu vaccinations. In this briefing we explain some of key details about this year's flu vaccination programme, as well as some of the additional pressures the sector is facing as a result of COVID-19.

NHS Flu Vaccinations: eligibility and demand

Community pharmacies are an important part of the NHS flu vaccination programme. Flu vaccination is one of the most effective interventions available to help reduce pressure on the health and social care system and now, alongside the risk of COVID-19, it is more important than ever that the vulnerable are protected.

This year the NHS has made the flu vaccine available to more people and wants the vaccination programme to be the biggest yet. Community pharmacies have been at the forefront of these efforts:

- In the first four weeks of the service community pharmacists vaccinated **over 650,000 NHS patients** – three times the number vaccinated in the same period last year.
- Community pharmacists have now vaccinated more than **1.3 million NHS patients** against flu.

Currently, priority is being given to people in high-risk groups such as those with certain medical conditions or aged 65 years or over. And for the first time, later in the season, all 50 to 64-year-olds in England will also be eligible for an NHS vaccination. However, this cohort will not be vaccinated until November or December time, once the vaccination of more vulnerable groups is well underway.

As pharmacies are getting more requests for vaccinations, and these are coming earlier in the season than usual, there are times when pharmacies have used up their existing stock and are waiting on the next delivery. Some pharmacies report that they have had to ask people to return at a later date for their vaccination or book an appointment in advance and you may hear reports of this from constituents. Anyone eligible for an NHS vaccination can be reassured that many community pharmacies (and GP surgeries) will receive their flu vaccine orders in phased deliveries over the next few weeks and months. This is normal practice, but demand is higher at the moment as people are recognising the risk of flu co-circulating with COVID-19.

The Government has also purchased additional stocks of flu vaccinations to make sure that everyone who needs to be vaccinated, can be, and these should be available later in the season.

Community pharmacies and COVID-19

As well as increased demand for flu vaccinations, in recent months community pharmacies across the country have been working flat out to maintain increased demand for medicines and healthcare advice:

- During the pandemic demand for prescription medicines grew: a record number of prescription items – 93 million - were dispensed in March 2020.

- Many pharmacies also remained open throughout the bank holidays in Easter and May to ensure patient access to medicines and healthcare advice could be maintained.
- There have also been reports of increases in telephone call handling and patient counselling, as well as anecdotal examples where patients have approached the pharmacy for ailments such as cuts and fractures.
- Pharmacy teams also implemented the Pandemic Delivery Service, which helped to ensure that those 'shielding' at home, with no means of collecting their medicines, were able to access their prescriptions.

Patient experience of pharmacy services during the pandemic has been positive. A recent survey has found that following the pandemic more people are likely to visit a pharmacy for advice before seeking help elsewhere. A survey on attitudes to the NHS following COVID-19, conducted by PAGB, the consumer healthcare association, found that almost one in three people who would not have visited a pharmacy for advice before seeking help elsewhere said they were more likely to do so following the pandemic. But there have also been some challenges, as some patients have been angry and frustrated at the new COVID-19 safety measures in place in some pharmacies, and we would appreciate MPs' help to reassure people that pharmacy teams are healthcare professionals doing all they can to help.

But while the sector has risen to the challenges of the pandemic, community pharmacy is facing a number of financial and operational challenges and the sector needs support in order to survive. Many pharmacies have taken on significantly higher costs during the COVID-19 pandemic to cover their staffing costs and all the safety measures required to keep people safe and they are facing significant financial challenges.

Some government support has been provided to help ease pressure on the sector, but it has not been sufficient. In the early months of the pandemic, HM Government agreed to inject urgent funding injections into the sector, worth a total of £370m, in order to ease cashflow. However, these payments were an advance and they will need to be paid back. Many pharmacies simply will not be able to afford this and it will exacerbate financial pressures.

PSNC, DHSC and NHSE&I are now in negotiations, which involve HM Treasury, about reconciliation ('writing-off') of this advance funding against the sector's significant COVID-19 related costs. PSNC is seeking funding to cover a range of costs including monies spent on staffing and PPE. Our aim is for contractor costs to be fully recompensed – both those already accrued and those still to come. PSNC is also continuing to seek financial protection for any pharmacies forced to close temporarily during the COVID-19 pandemic.

What can MPs do to help?

Call for additional support for the sector

MPs can help by publicly backing the sector and pressing HM Government for additional financial and operational support. This is vital if pharmacies are to remain open and continue supporting patients throughout the winter months. To help, MPs can write letters to officials asking for the following:

- The £370m advance payments made to the sector to be written off to relieve the immediate financial pressures on community pharmacies.
- A boost to overall community pharmacy funding in recognition of the very great financial pressures facing the sector and the critical and valuable roles that pharmacies have undertaken during the pandemic.

Share some messaging with constituents

We would also be grateful if you could help share some key messages to constituents via your website or local media to help encourage them to be patient with pharmacy staff this winter and continue to adhere to social distancing and safety measures.

Further information

For any queries, or for further information, please contact: commsteam@psnc.org.uk