

June 2022

PSNC Pharmacy Advice Audit 2022: A summary of findings

This briefing summarises the results of the third Pharmacy Advice Audit run by PSNC between 31st January and 11th March 2022. 4,139 community pharmacies in England participated in the audit, the findings of which clearly demonstrate that patients and the public are now more reliant than ever before on pharmacies for healthcare advice.

Introduction

As the most accessible healthcare locations in England and the home of highly qualified medicines experts, community pharmacies have a natural role as the first port of call for patients and members of the public with minor health concerns. This role was cemented with the introduction of the Community Pharmacist Consultation Service (CPCS) in 2019, which sees GPs, NHS 111 online and NHS 111 referring patients with certain minor symptoms or health needs to pharmacies for a consultation. Pharmacies receive a fee for offering this service on behalf of the NHS.

But pharmacies also offer healthcare advice to millions of patients who do not have a referral from one of these routes. These patients often walk into their pharmacy as a first option, or they may have been unable to access another part of the health system, or they might have been referred informally. Though these patients receive a similar consultation with a pharmacist or other qualified member of staff, pharmacies receive no direct funding for these informal consultations. Pharmacies are not required to record the number of informal consultations that they provide on a daily basis, so the demand for them can also be hard to quantify.

PSNC's Pharmacy Advice Audits have aimed to investigate this, asking pharmacy teams across the country to record the number of these informal healthcare consultations that they undertake over the course of a single day. The first such audit took place in the summer of 2020, with a second conducted in 2021 and the latest audit in early 2022. This briefing outlines some of the key results of the latest Pharmacy Advice Audit. The 2022 Pharmacy Advice Audit differed somewhat from the previous two audits in that the audit also sought to collect information on the level of severity of complaints for which patients were attending their pharmacy. But taken together, the results of all three audits show an increasing reliance on pharmacies year on year.

Audit Methodology

Between the end of January and the beginning of March 2022, 4,139 community pharmacies in England took part in the audit. The pharmacy teams were required to record information on a minimum of 20 patient consultations that happened over the course of a single day or longer (i.e. until 20 patient consultations had been achieved). The participating pharmacy teams were asked to note why the patient had come to the pharmacy, what the consultation was for (e.g. a question about an existing health condition or a query regarding a medicine), the amount of time spent on the consultation, the outcome of the consultation (e.g. over the counter sale of a medicine or onward referral to another health professional), the severity of the presenting complaint, and where the patient would have gone if pharmacy advice had not been readily available.

Key Results from the Audit

In total, **82,872 patient consultations** were recorded by the 4,139 community pharmacies, indicating that the average pharmacy carries out around **19 consultations per day**. This means that more than **1.2 million informal consultations are taking place in England's community pharmacies every week, totalling 65 million consultations per year**. This is a notable increase on the findings of last year's audit, which indicated that pharmacies were providing 58 million informal consultations a year at that point in time. The average staff time per consultation was nearly six minutes.

During the 2022 audit, **almost half of patients reported that if they did not have easy access to a pharmacy, they would have visited their GP**. As such, we can estimate that pharmacy advice currently saves 619,000 GP appointments every week; this equates to 95 appointments for every single GP practice each week across the country and **an incredible 32.2 million GP appointments saved in total over the course of the year**.

Other key findings of the 2022 audit included that:

- Every week, pharmacies help over **865,000 patients who are presenting at the pharmacy for clinical advice about symptoms** and over **251,000 patients who have questions about an existing medical condition**.
- 17% of the patients seen by pharmacies had to be referred on to another healthcare professional for advice/treatment. Of those, 23% were deemed by the pharmacist as requiring urgent treatment: this means that **community pharmacists identify 2.5 million patients a year needing urgent assessment**.
- **More and more people are now using pharmacy as their first port of call**: 80.3% of the consultations recorded in the 2022 audit were the result of self-referrals, compared to 76% in 2021.

During the audit, 9% of people seeking advice from a pharmacy had been informally referred from either their local GP practice or NHS 111, this is nearly **120,000 referrals every week**. These are all referrals that could and should have been made by the NHS Community Pharmacist Consultation Service (CPCS).

Pharmacy teams **successfully concluded 83%** of the consultations recorded in the audit, the remaining 17% of patients were referred to another healthcare professional for advice/treatment. Of those patients referred onto another healthcare professional by their pharmacy, 23% were deemed by the pharmacist as requiring urgent treatment. If we extrapolate the results of the audit, this means that **pharmacists identify 2.5 million patients a year needing urgent assessment**. Just over 40% of the consultations recorded in the audit resulted in the pharmacy giving advice without the sale of a medicine and nearly half resulted in the over-the-counter sale of a medicine.

The findings also indicated some of the pressures on the wider health service and the significant that pharmacies are having on reducing these. In particular, the audit results suggest that nearly **a quarter of a million consultations** are carried out in community pharmacies every week because **patients are unable to access another part of the healthcare system**.

Conclusions

This audit, along with the earlier two audits in 2020 and 2021, have shown patients are increasingly reliant on the informal healthcare advice provided by community pharmacies.

In summary, the audit findings indicate that:

- Community pharmacies carry out **65 million informal healthcare consultations per year**;
- **Almost half** of these patients would otherwise have attended GP practices;
- Pharmacy advice saves 619,000 GP appointments each week or **32.2 million appointments per year**;
- **Increasing numbers of people are self-referring** to a pharmacy now; and
- Pharmacists identify **2.5 million patients a year requiring urgent advice or treatment**.

It is clear that the extra burden placed on General Practice and other healthcare settings would be unsustainable should this advice offered by community pharmacies be taken away. Also clear from the audit is that a high number of patients continue to be informally referred to pharmacy by NHS 111 and general practice, rather than using the formal CPCS referral route. Not only do pharmacies miss out on critical funding because of this, but this also poses the risk that patients are not being appropriately followed up.

For further information, please contact [PSNC's Communications Team](#).