

# Community pharmacists in RN Macedonia at the frontline of COVID-19 pandemic beginning: March-April 2020

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## Introduction

According to Gallup Honesty and Integrity survey for different professions, pharmacists are forth most honest and ethical professionals, along with nurses, medical doctors and grad-school teachers (Sarasoehn-Kahn, 2020). Community pharmacist is a health profession that plays a key role in responding to health crisis, especially in COVID-19 pandemic. There is no doubt that community pharmacists are one of the most accessible healthcare professionals. Actually, recent study points out that median number of visits to community pharmacies was significantly higher when compared with visits to primary care physicians, 13 vs 7, accordingly (Berenbrok et al., 2020). Past two years of the current pandemic have confirmed that community pharmacies were often the first point of contact with the healthcare system for patients either for COVID-19-related health care advices, as well as for chronic and acute health problems related issues, especially at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic when restructuring of the health care system on primary and secondary level was undergoing (Hedima et al., 2021). In this difficult situation of public health crisis, in order to meet the needs of patients and to maintain the continuity of health services, it was extremely important to use the potential of pharmaceutical care in community pharmacy practice. At the same time, it was extremely important to recognize the importance and role of community pharmacists in the continuous and unreserved population needs meeting and patients support provision in order to reduce the pressure on other primary health care sectors and prevent the spread of panic among general population. The International Pharmaceutical

Federation (FIP) has published provisional guidelines for the pharmaceutical workforce outlining key activities that are part of the professional responsibility of pharmacists during the current pandemic (FIP, 2020). Therefore, in a public health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to evaluate the roles and activities that community pharmacists can take to help relieve stress in other areas of health care, such as general practice and emergency departments. The aim of the current retrospective observational study was to evaluate and compare the community pharmacists' activities at the beginning of the pandemic (March-April, 2020) with the ones before (January-February, 2020).

## Materials and methods

The design and structure of the questionnaire was performed in April 2020. It was distributed among 10 community pharmacists in order to evaluate the clarity, complexity and understanding of questions. The survey was conducted via SurveyMonkey® platform during May 2020. Each community pharmacy in RN Macedonia registered at national registry of community pharmacies (<https://lekovi.zdravstvo.gov.mk/pharmacies>) was sent an e-mail with invitation request and link to the questionnaire. One questionnaire per community pharmacy was allowed. It consisted of 18 questions distributed in 3 categories - demographic characteristics, quantitative characterization (number of patients assessed via number of dispensed prescriptions and number of issued invoices) and qualitative characterization (most frequent requests from patients, services provided, new services introduced, problems identified in

communication with patients related to medications, patient relations, etc., problems identified in terms of work organization).

Obtained data were tabulated using Microsoft Excel® (Microsoft Corp. Redmond, WA, USA) and were computed and consequently evaluated using statistical software STATGRAPHICS Centurion XVI evaluation (StatPoint technologies Inc., USA).

## Results and discussion

The number of community pharmacies that responded to the questionnaire was 214. The community pharmacies were from the whole territory of RN Macedonia, with most from the capital Skopje (33.64%), followed by Bitola (11.21%) and Kumanovo (7.94%). The average number of patients in the period January-April 2020 was 4219.6 per month per community pharmacy. The average number of dispensed prescriptions on monthly level per community pharmacy was 2975.53. 90.38% answered that in March and April 2020 had higher demand for OTC medications compared to January and February 2020. Also, vast majority of the community pharmacies (91.35%) had increased requests for pharmaceutical care in patients in March and April 2020, compared to the period before the COVID-19 pandemic was declared. The most frequent requests were related to instructions for using protective masks, gloves, disinfectants (80.32%), problems with disease treatment (47.34%) and therapy prescriptions (42.02%). Slightly less than half of the surveyed community pharmacies (46.12%) encountered problems in the attitude of patients towards working staff such as aggression and disrespect. Majority (69.42%) answered that changing of the working time at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (March-April 2020) affected the well-being of the staff and that it resulted with increased workload of community pharmacy staff (71.84%). Only 22.33% practiced home delivery of medications to "vulnerable categories", while 26.7% had options, but didn't practice home delivery due to the complicated conditions in which they operated in that period and the rest (50.97%) didn't have such possibilities. 19.38% stated that they consider possibility for home delivery of medications in the near future. Almost all (98.06%) of community pharmacies continued to provide self-care advice to their patients continuously and efficiently. Nearly half of the respondents (51.46%) answered that they didn't receive directions and recommendations for organizing work during a pandemic from any official state institution. As additional remarks most comments were related to the little attention given to the role and activities of community pharmacists during COVID-19 pandemic by the official government bodies although they are often first line of contact for the public

in normal healthcare situation and even more at the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic with closing of outpatient departments in primary and secondary health care system. Some of the comments are:

"No institution found it necessary to explain more that the "most accessed" health worker was the pharmacist. His role was to protect, educate, encourage the patient, and supply him with medications, protective equipment and disinfectants, at the same time protecting himself and his family. Appreciations to patients who showed respect for our efforts."

"In the whole situation, the community pharmacies were left on their own. With great effort and consistent work, we tried to respond to the needs of the patients, despite all the difficulties we encountered."

"Community pharmacists are forgotten health care workers."

## Conclusion

Pharmacists at community settings took active role in COVID-19 pandemic since its beginning. They quickly adjusted to the emergency situation arisen with COVID-19 pandemic situation. Although they faced significantly increased patients demands and workload in general they manage to efficiently provide continuous pharmaceutical care. They believe that government policymakers should appreciate and value their role and activities more.

## References

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