

Role and activities of pharmacists in RN Macedonia at the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic: March-April 2020

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Introduction

Since the appearance of COVID-19 in early 2020 and especially after the WHO declared a pandemic in March 2020, daily life and routine work activities have undergone drastic changes. Globally, all labor sectors were severely affected, but the biggest burden was initially borne by the health sector. Pharmacists have had a large share in the efforts to tackle the pandemic and its aftermath, ranging from research and development of drugs and vaccines to the dispensing of drugs, the provision of personal protective equipment and the essential pharmaceutical care. Although pharmacists along with physicians were at the forefront of the healthcare system, their activities and role were underestimated in general. Pharmacists were rarely mentioned as essential frontline health care providers by the news media, the public, or politicians (Goff et al., 2020).

The aim of this study was to assess the role and activities of pharmacists in RN Macedonia at the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic, March-April 2022.

Materials and methods

A cross-sectional online survey was conducted via SurveyMonkey platform in the period 24.04-02.05.2020. The questionnaire was taken from <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/COVID-19-Pharmacy-responses-commonwealth>, modified and adapted with the aim of comparing the situation in our country with other countries during the evaluation. The questionnaire was translated into Macedonian language and tested by 10 respondents for clarity and understanding, as well as potential ambiguity. There were 24 questions in total, where 5 were related to demographic data, such as

profession, gender, age, predominant pharmaceutical sector working in and years of practice in the profession. The survey was done by Center for continuous education and National pharmacoinformatic center (NFIC), Faculty of pharmacy, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje using social media for distribution and MALMED (Agency for drugs and medical devices of RN Macedonia) as partner in the survey

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

Results and discussion

The purpose of this research was to detect what problems affect pharmacists in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, how pharmacists and professional bodies respond to the pandemic and what support would be helpful according to their opinion.

The questionnaire was answered by 511 people, with pharmacists represented by 81.8%, pharmacy technicians by 13.3%, pharmacy students 1.76% and 3.3% others (mostly postgraduated specialists and PhD). Females were dominant responders (84.74%). The average age was 38.34 ± 10.08 years. Mostly of the respondents worked as community pharmacists (58.9%). The percentage of those working in pharmaceutical industry was 14.68%, while 7.44% were in drug wholesaling, and 5.48% and 5.68% as hospital/clinical pharmacists and university professors, accordingly. The average professional working experience was 13.52 ± 9.58 years. When it comes to the level of concern about impact of COVID-19 on personal level 47.55% were worried, 24.85% were very worried and 9.59% were extremely worried. On the other hand, 14.68%

were extremely worried, 28.96% very worried and 39.53% worried about the impact of COVID-19 on their profession. COVID-19 did not have influence on working efficacy in 67.88% of respondents, while 28.96% and 3.33% find it difficult and very difficult, respectively. These results are opposite to the findings of Ashiru-Oredope et al. (2020), where extreme worry was observed to be higher on a personal level than on a professional level and two-thirds of respondents stated that had difficulties to work effectively during the COVID-19 pandemic. More than a half (57.14%) did not work remotely which is expected as similar was the % of respondents working in community pharmacy setting. 17.61% worked partially and 23.48% worked completely from their homes. Three most common challenges during remote working were difficulty in communication with co-workers (51.27%), restricted access to the tools or information need to do the job at home (41.88%) and adherence to a regular schedule of activities (40.31%). 431 respondents answered the question related to their concern about the impact of COVID-19 on their work currently and in the future. The most frequent comments were related to economy and health. On the question related to involvement/consultation about preparation and implementation of the COVID-19 pandemic measures 17.81 answered their pharmaceutical company, personally (11.55%) or they knew a colleague pharmacist (15.07%) that was directly involved. According to the respondents the pharmaceutical profession can make an additional contribution / support in improving the healthcare system activity in dealing with COVID-19 by research of vaccines, drugs and patient education. 70.25% did not have any training related to pandemic dealing. Most of the surveyed are concerned about their own health, health of their family and public health in general. As COVID-19 information sources mostly used were Ministry of health (84.74%), WHO (80.63%), Internet search (Google, YouTube) (57.53%), TV (51.27%) and Social networks (44.77%) 79.45% did not participate in any official training courses or web based courses. Of those that participated in such training (20.55%), mostly noted WHO, FIP, Ministry of health, professional association and their company as organizers. A vast number of respondents would like to improve their knowledge for COVID-19 pharmaceutical management (68.43%) and control of infection prevention (51.27%).

Nearly half (53.51%) stated that social distancing resulted with workload increase in community pharmacies. In most of the community pharmacies a limited number of patients in the pharmacy, wearing personal protective equipment (facial masks, gloves, visors), using disinfectants (liquids, gels and sprays), marking a distance of 2m as protective measures were taken. Protective measures were mostly provided by companies where respondents worked, and only 17.36% answered that some

other company/organization was involved with most frequent answers pointing to the Ministry of health, Red Cross, private-own companies that donated visors and disinfectants etc. Most common remarks were related to the underestimation and need for greater appreciation of pharmacist work and their contribution in response to COVID-19.

Conclusion

The relevance of the survey is foreseen as it was answered by 418 licensed pharmacists who encountered ~17% of all licensed pharmacists in RN Macedonia. 233 worked in community pharmacies thus representing ~16% of community pharmacists in RN Macedonia. The study indicated the most common problems that affected pharmacists in COVID-19 pandemic response and raised questions for higher inclusion of pharmacists and pharmaceutical professional bodies towards response to COVID-19.

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