

Pharmacy practice in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic- a pilot project from Bulgaria

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Introduction

No other event in the recent history of mankind has been so impactful as the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by the discovered in 2019 coronavirus – SARS -CoV2. Coronaviruses are well known as most of them cause mild to moderate respiratory infections like the common flu. Despite that the SARS-CoV2 was declared a global pandemic by the World health organization in the beginning of 2020. The pandemic resulted in million deaths and other health complications. Bulgaria is one of the most affected countries in Eastern Europe (Rangachev et al., 2022). The first registered case of COVID-19 in Bulgaria at the beginning of March 2020 was followed by a series of anti-epidemic measures, which were repeatedly amended. The high excess mortality in Bulgaria correlates with intensity of testing, with delayed imposition of “lockdown” measures, and with high prevalence of cardiovascular diseases (Mackenzie and Smith, 2020). In the times of public emergencies such as pandemic situations, medical professionals are challenged to ensure that patient needs are met. The significant role of community pharmacies in the COVID-19 pandemic has been researched in many countries (Strand et al., 2020; Visacri et al., 2021), however, the response of the Bulgarian pharmacists has not yet been studied. The purpose of this research was to evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the pharmacy practice in Bulgaria.

Materials and methods

The study used web-based cross-sectional survey methodology. The questions were developed then validated by the authors. Both snowball sampling and purposive sampling were used. The questionnaire consisted of 15 questions developed using the Microsoft

Forms application they were sent to pharmacy’s emails and answers were gathered between June 2021 and August 2021. The answers were analyzed using descriptive statistic method.

Results

Until current date the discovered in 2019 SARS-CoV2 virus has caused four pandemic waves in Bulgaria. Community pharmacists are known as providers of essential care, they enable the continual provision of medicinal products, medicinal information and high-quality services. As healthcare establishments (under the MPHMA), pharmacies welcome patients of all age groups with various health problems daily. Due to the asymptomatic course of COVID-19, and the long incubation period, the risk of contact with the virus in the pharmacy is high. Complying with all hygiene requirements, pharmacists identify the need for further reorganization of the work to reduce the risk of infecting staff and patients.

The study involved 120 pharmacists, most of them were women (48%). They practiced in both community and hospital pharmacies during the pandemic waves in Bulgaria. The study involved 87 master pharmacists (a total of 75%) of the participants in the survey, 15 master pharmacists holding the position of pharmacy manager, which is 11% of the participants, and 16 assistant pharmacists, or a total of 14% of respondents. As a place of work 91 pharmacists, or 77% of the respondents, indicated pharmacies in the big Bulgarian cities, and 27 (23%) indicated that they practice in a pharmacy located in a small town. 46% of respondents work in private pharmacies that are part of retail chains, and the remaining 54% work in independent pharmacies that are not part of pharmacy chains.

The predominant part of the participants (67%) reported that they find they have a sufficient knowledge on the COVID-19 symptoms, prevention and treatment.

Pharmacists reported that they have joined some of the webinars provided by the Bulgarian pharmaceutical union and the digital events organized by FIP in order to get additional knowledge and qualification regarding COVID-19. The surveyed pharmacists also reported an increase in the counseling sessions in the pharmacies and patients' interest in prevention methods that often led to drug-related problems and irrational use of medicines. 32% of the surveyed pharmacists experienced increased stress levels and 27% assess their concentration as low. In addition to the traditional daily services related to the preparation, storage, dispensing of quality, efficient and safe medicinal products, during a pandemic pharmacy professionals assume additional responsibilities, such as execution of prescriptions by official section for chronically ill patients (section S), providing the necessary medicines, additional disinfection of the pharmacy, provision of personal protective equipment and disinfectants, providing additional information.

Conclusion

The findings of our study support other studies that have shown the significant social role of pharmacists that is more obvious in time of crisis and disruptions like the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a challenge that continues to provoke health economic and social issues that can only be overcome by collaborative efforts of all members of the community.

References

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