

## Community pharmacy practice in Montenegro in the period January-April 2020

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### Introduction

The overall impact of the COVID-19 pandemic imposed a need for significant reorganization of health care services (Giannopoulou and Tsobanoglou, 2020). From the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was no doubt that innovative and adaptable methods of practice were needed in all health care professions (Cadogan and Hughes, 2021). Maximizing the contribution of community pharmacists in providing overall health care and full utilization of the potential of pharmaceutical care in order to reduce the workload of GPs, required definition of a new approach to the organization of the overall health care system and application of new innovative and expanded methods of pharmaceutical care practice while at the same time ensuring that patients continue to have unrestricted and open access to community pharmacies. Community pharmacies are on the frontline of the interface between the community and healthcare because of physical proximity and easier access to the public (Dzingirai et al., 2020). At a time when there were limitations on the possibility of direct contact with doctors and access to adequate medical care and health services for patients, pharmacists as the most accessible health care workers were on the first line of primary health care, with multiple workloads, and at the same time facing the dangers associated with the coronavirus on a daily basis (Allinson et al., 2022). During the beginning of the pandemic caused by SARS-Cov-19 when all the attention of the world public was directed to the pharmaceutical

profession in anticipation of vaccine / drug for prevention / treatment of COVID-19, and taking into account the activities and engagements of pharmacists in community pharmacies, in the context of recognizing and valorizing their work globally, the question arose to what extent their contribution is valued.

The aim of the study was to get insight into the dynamics and character of pharmacy practice in order to make quantitative analysis (number of patients served, number of prescriptions issued) and qualitative analysis (most frequent patient requests, provided services, identified problems in relation to work organization) of pharmaceutical services in the period before (January - February, 2020) and at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (March-April, 2020) in Montenegro.

### Materials and methods

The design and structure of the questionnaire was previously conducted in RN Macedonia by the Faculty of Pharmacy, University of St. Cyril and Methodius in Skopje where the research took place in May 2020. In Montenegro the same questionnaire, only translated to Montenegrin language, was available in June 2020. The survey in Montenegro was conducted as mutual collaboration along with Institut “Simo Milosevic” and Pharmaceutical chamber of Montenegro. The online survey was conducted via SurveyMonkey® platform. One questionnaire per community pharmacy was allowed and could be completed by any community pharmacy (public or private) in Montenegro that liked to make contributions

in the understanding of the above noted issues. It consisted of 18 questions. 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 survey was completed by 10.65% of existing community pharmacies in Montenegro. The average number of patients per community pharmacy on a monthly level was 3295.3, while at the same time the average number of dispensed prescriptions was 1217.3 with the highest ones in both cases recorded in March 2020, when COVID-19 pandemic was declared. The highest numbers of patients were recorded on March 16, while the most prescriptions were dispensed on March 18. Nearly 97% of community pharmacies had increased demands for dispensing of OTC medications (analgesics, antipyretics and vitamins) in March and April 2020 compared to January and February 2020. Also, ~97% of respondents answered that there was difference of pharmaceutical care requests of patients at the beginning of COVID-10 pandemic compared to ones before. The most frequent requests were allied to instructions for using protective masks, gloves, disinfectants (82.14%), problems with disease treatment (21.43%) and therapy prescriptions (35.71%). The changes in working hours influenced the well-being of community pharmacy working staff (65.52%). However, 55.17% responded that changes in working hours did not influence workload of the employees. Nearly half (48.28%), noted that they faced some problems in direct patient communication (aggression and disrespect). Only 10,71% of community pharmacies practiced home delivery of medication to vulnerable categories of patients, and only 16% considered that possibility in the near future. Efficient and continuous pharmaceutical care related to self-care and OTC dispensing was provided in ~93% of surveyed community pharmacies. Most of the community pharmacies (60.72%) received directions and recommendations for organizing work during a pandemic from an official state institution (National coordinative body, Pharmaceutical chamber, Ministry of health, Institute for public health). Some of additional remarks given by respondents are as follows:

“Incorrectness and unfair competition are one of the problems that came to light during the pandemic.”

“Greater solidarity in our profession is necessary constantly, not only during crisis situations.”

“Unavailability of face masks at the beginning. Improper wearing of masks, measures are in force, but improper use lacks effect.”

“It is obligatory to increase patients' awareness of us as an important link in the health system, and not only as "sellers". It comes from ourselves and we have to work on it together.”

## Conclusion

The results of the survey show that both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, pharmacists in community pharmacies are very important for the functioning of the healthcare system and the provision of primary health care. With this in mind, health care policy makers and government regulatory bodies need to create the conditions for improved and appropriate valorization of the role and activities of community pharmacists as vital health care workers.

## References

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