

Post-pandemic period in N. Macedonia: an opportunity to expand the role of pharmacist

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Introduction

One lesson coming from the COVID-19 pandemic is that health systems have a central role in addressing the crisis. To maintain health security for all, integrated, quality, and people-centered primary health care remains crucial to the national response during health emergencies. Providing more resilient and equitable access to health care services is one of the most important segments of a health care system. In order to build a quality health system, it is necessary to acknowledge the irreplaceability of pharmaceutical care services.

According to WHO, medicines are considered a priority for reaching the highest attainable standard of health. It is essential to note that providing medicines is not the only responsibility of the health care system; it is also using them appropriately. Many societal and health system factors, as well as professionals, contribute to the way medicines are used. In this context, rational use of medicines is explained through the Concept of rational use of medicines, which requires that patients receive medicines appropriate to their clinical needs, in the dosage corresponding to their individual requirements, during an appropriate period of time, and at the lowest possible cost to them and the community. In fact, rational use of medicines is one of the most significant responsibilities of a pharmacist.

North Macedonia: Response to the COVID-19 pandemic

North Macedonia's health system has been placed under a significant burden by the COVID-19 pandemic, as

in many other countries, deeply affecting the health of many people, both COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 patients, because of disruptions in the normal provision of health services (WHO, 2021).

As a matter of fact, the health system faced many challenges on a daily basis, which led to a shortage of health professionals, a shortage of medicines, irrational use of medicines, unsatisfactory treatment of COVID-19 patients, and neglecting patients with chronic diseases.

The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the urgent need to strengthen the health care services in our country.

Pharmaceutical care services: contributing to the improved therapeutical outcome of COVID-19 patients worldwide

As healthcare professionals, pharmacists played a vital role in public health during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the whole pandemic, pharmacists were the most accessible healthcare providers and the first point of contact for patients (Dominique et al., 2022). One of the fundamental roles of pharmacists is to ensure the availability of medicines and continuous access to medication, and to provide the safest and most effective therapy (EDQM, 2012). In this role, pharmacists had a plan for identifying and reducing drug shortages during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is crucial given that drug shortages can lead to the prescribing of suboptimal therapy and have been associated with patient harm. Hospital and clinical pharmacists have led efforts by managing the numerous drug shortages that have emerged during the pandemic. They have evaluated and used novel therapies for hospitalized patients with COVID-19, and they have done patient monitoring and follow-up, as well as detection and referral of suspected cases of COVID-19.

Besides ensuring that patients are receiving the best possible pharmaceutical care, pharmacists take their place as pharmaceutical scientists who are engaged in clinical research and vaccine development.

Community pharmacists are still among the health professionals on the front line, educating and providing information about medicines to the population, and the health team when needed; serving patients throughout the pandemic by increasing the accessibility of medications with home delivery services; increasing the use of telehealth to provide continuous care in physician office-based practices, in clinics, and in community pharmacies; and increasing the health care access for the patients by taking a part of COVID-19 testing and vaccination (Nurul et al., 2022; Mustapha et al., 2020).

Implementation of pharmaceutical care services in N. Macedonia—redefining the pharmacist's role

The growing expectations of society for health and health care mean a demand for services that are more focused on the individual patient, a higher quality of health care within the community, and a more effective participation in decisions that can be reached by fully implementing the philosophy of practice-pharmaceutical care.

Published evidence shows that implementation of pharmaceutical care services (e.g., medication reconciliation, adherence and knowledge assessments, medication optimization, patient counseling) effectively prevents irrational drug use, resulting in a decreased rate of morbidity, mortality, adverse drug reactions, antimicrobial resistance, and financial loss (Dalton and Byrne, 2017). Pharmaceutical care services, along with public health interventions and effective medicine supply management, are key components of the rational use of drugs and promoting health.

The concept of pharmaceutical care has been well defined in developed countries for patient care at hospitals and community pharmacy settings, but its implementation in developing countries, such as N. Macedonia, is still theoretical and practically nonexistent. In fact, in our country, there is no regulation that allows the implementation of contracted pharmaceutical services.

The first barrier is actually the reason: pharmaceutical services are not regulated under the category of "service" since it is not considered as a location of "healthcare services" delivery. This should be the first step of the change needed, keeping in mind that the services delivered by these facilities are regulated. To do this, the major role in seeking the reorientation of the services belongs to the government, directed by the Ministry of Health, industry and pharmaceutical trade, healthcare professionals, and the population/users.

Conclusion

In order to achieve resilience for the next health emergency, investing in public health should be a priority of the government in N. Macedonia. Hence, national health authorities should develop strategic interventions to reform the health care system with a new regulatory framework that will emphasize pharmaceutical care services as well as all other health services.

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