

ALUMNI SERIES

SERVICES PROVIDED BY COMMUNITY PHARMACISTS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Patients faced interruptions in seeking healthcare during the outbreak of coronavirus disease due to fear of infection, difficulty reaching physicians or healthcare facilities, and medicine supply interruptions. Despite adhering to some rules and restrictions throughout the pandemic, community pharmacies have remained accessible to the public and have worked on the front lines, providing essential services with the aim of ensuring the continuity of healthcare in the community. COVID-19 has led to a paradigm shift in community pharmacists' roles from dispensing medications to providing patient-centered care [1].

During the pandemic, over-the-counter (OTC) drugs like paracetamol and ibuprofen, herbal remedies, and supplements, such as vitamins C and D, were highly sought after as preventive measures against COVID-19. The increased consumption of these medications has resulted in irrational use, incorrect dosages, and misconceptions about their effectiveness in treating COVID-19 [2]. This underscores the vital role of community pharmacists in preventing the inappropriate use of vitamins and OTC products [2].

There was also a surge in demand for medicine supplies, which led to a medication shortage and an insufficient supply of medicines. Hence, community pharmacists were rapidly adapting their front-line services to meet unprecedented demand by balancing the supply and demand of medications to ensure an uninterrupted drug supply chain to the community. As the role of community pharmacists is significantly trusted by patients to maintain the continuity of medicine supply, they have collaborated with physicians in providing therapeutic substitutions that are available in the market [3].

Community pharmacists have also contributed significantly to maintaining continuity of care for individuals with chronic diseases during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many patients experienced reduced adherence during this time due to difficulties accessing healthcare facilities and obtaining medications [4]. Over 50% of the vulnerable population with chronic diseases relied on community pharmacists for their care, including medication management, as they were highly accessible during the outbreak [5]. Community pharmacists provided telemedicine consultations via telephone and electronic channels, improving patient adherence to chronic therapies, especially for those who do not need to visit a clinic or required prescription renewals [4]. Additionally, they offered medication home delivery services to high-risk populations, such as the elderly, individuals with AIDS, asthma, tuberculosis, diabetes, hypertension, and COPD, limiting the need for these populations to visit the pharmacy [6, 7].

COVID-19 has underscored the crucial involvement of community pharmacists in vaccination programs. They not only serve as vaccination sites but also monitor adverse effects and outcomes through ambulatory and tele-pharmacy services [1]. Even before the pandemic, community pharmacists successfully administered a variety of vaccines, including seasonal, pandemic influenza, travel, and hepatitis B vaccines [8]. During the H1N1 pandemic, their active involvement significantly increased vaccine uptake to 80% of the population [9]. The active engagement of community pharmacists in vaccination is expected to continue beyond the COVID-19 era.

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