

## INNOVATIONS IN PHARMACY HELP IN FIRST YEAR OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

***European pharmacists have been an unquestionable part of the medical frontline during the coronavirus crisis. This was highlighted by every participant of an international conference organised by the European Federation of Pharmaceutical Chains (EFPC). They agreed that the deployment of health professionals, the willingness to take innovative approaches and the ability to implement rapid change were all key to working in exceptional circumstances.***

**Bucharest / Prague, 10 March 2021** – The PHARMACY CARE – BEYOND THE PANDEMIC conference organised by the EFPC, unlike its last conference in 2019, took place virtually, via video links and two studios as a result of coronavirus crisis restrictions. A broadcast centre was set up in Bucharest, the capital city of Romania. Prague was chosen as the second centre. In total, 360 participants registered for the conference.

In his introductory speech, Daniel Horák, Head of EFPC executive board and head of the Czech Association of Pharmacy Chain Operators, highlighted the fundamental changes undergone in pharmacy in the first year of the pandemic. While brick-and-mortar pharmacies recorded a year-on-year decline, online pharmacies demonstrated clear successes and confirmed the legitimacy of certain innovative trends. First, however, the safety of staff in both pharmacies and logistics had to be ensured, even in situations where the global market was experiencing a lack of protective equipment. Thanks to this, pharmacies could provide almost uninterrupted services, even when some surgeries were closed. Therefore, they represented the most accessible routine medical care.

Innovations that helped them cope fundamentally with the changed situation were the electronic prescription and the medication reservation system. It has also become evident that real needs can push the boundaries of applicable legislation – this applies with home deliveries of prescribed medicines, which Czech law does not permit in normal circumstances, but has been tolerated throughout the COVID crisis. The next speaker, Sebastian Ring, member of EFPC executive board, confirmed that pharmacists all over Europe had played an essential role in frontline healthcare, followed by Alexandru Rafila, a Deputy Speaker of the Romanian Chamber of Deputies and World Health Organization (WHO) Executive Board Member, who addressed the subject of a sufficiently robust healthcare system.

The pharmaceutical market has experienced serious shortages during the pandemic, which was reflected in the temporary unavailability of certain products and protective equipment. The next speaker, Nathalie Moll, Director General of the European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations (EFPIA), mapped out the bottlenecks behind the shortages of medications and noted that there was still a lack of consensus within the EU about how to prevent them. Feller Antal, Head of the executive board of the Hungarian Association of Pharmaceutical Wholesalers, first compared the different definitions of drug shortages across the European Countries. Then he analyzed the many causes of shortages, provided data on the Hungarian situation and finally spoke about the new European guidelines regarding drug shortages.

Former Dean of the Faculty of Pharmacy at Bratislava's Comenius University, Ján Kyselovič, went on to declare that alongside temporary shortage issues, the lack of qualified staff was a long-standing issue in pharmacy, which proved to be particularly pronounced during the pandemic. In his opinion, the current critical situation has recorded a shift of the regulatory barriers in healthcare, since pandemic reality has demonstrated the limited practicality of the existing regulations in exceptional circumstances. In his view, this has significantly restricted the launch of new services in pharmacies. In this context, there has been much talk recently about vaccination by pharmacists. The former head of the Czech State Institute for Drug Control and EFPC Executive Director, Zdeněk Blahuta, also spoke of this, comparing, for instance, the degree of willingness to be vaccinated between healthcare professionals and the general public. He highlighted that it was only slightly higher amongst medical professionals. The former Czech Minister of Health, Roman Prymula, provided a comprehensive overview of the current vaccination options against COVID-19. Secretary of the Health Committee at the Romanian Senate, Mr Attila enforced the idea of implementing the pharmaceutical services in pharmacies and, also the pharmacist role as a health professional during the pandemic.

Marcin Tomasik, legal expert of the Polish Association of Pharmaceutical Employers, pointed out that Europe is not a legislative monolith in terms of the organization of pharmacy markets, the number and rules of pharmacy operation. European legislation in this respect is very diverse and historically and culturally conditioned. So there is no clear pattern of development for the pharmacy market. Some countries like Great Britain, Ireland, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Norway, Sweden etc. are examples of liberal markets, with a tendency to open them up to improve the availability of drugs and pharmacy services. In others, such as in Spain, Austria or France, a high level of state interference in the market persists. However, even where the pharmacy market is strictly regulated, usually two types of restrictions are most common, with numerous exceptions. Meanwhile, in four Central and Eastern European countries: Poland, Hungary, Latvia and Estonia, as many as four types of restrictions have been introduced in the last decade. Additionally, Poland introduced a total ban on advertising activities of a pharmacy – a phenomenon against both the CEE and the EU background.

The EFPC plans to hold its next conference in 2022 in Warsaw.

Zdeněk Blahuta  
*Executive Director of the EFPC*