



EFPC ORGANIZED UNIQUE GATHERING OF PHARMACISTS FROM EUROPEAN PHARMACY CHAINS IN PRAGUE

The beginning of June saw the official kick-off of the latest project by the European Federation of Pharmacy Chains (EFPC) for pharmacists from the various member states and various pharmacy chains, who are organized within their respective national associations. This project, which has been named the "European Academy of Chain Pharmacists", has become a unique platform for meetings among pharmacists who take an interest in topics related to the European market and wish to familiarize themselves with the different conditions under which the pharmacy sector operates in various jurisdictions across Europe. In its first year, the Academy convened in Prague in the Czech Republic; it was attended by 35 pharmacists representing 10 chains and 6 European countries. Barbora Přikrylová, a Czech pharmacist, acted as the host of the event.

The European Academy of Chain Pharmacists offered the special opportunity of having an open discussion about the way in which the pharmacy business operates in various European countries – aimed this time not at chain managers but at the pharmacists themselves. They, as representatives of their country, familiarized their foreign counterparts with the legislation and rules affecting pharmacists in their home country, the services they offer and the mechanisms for the dispensation and distribution of pharmaceuticals. In this way, participants of the Academy found out about the inner workings of the pharmacy sector in Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Poland, Serbia and, of course, the Czech Republic.

The gathering of pharmacists was attended by Daniel Horák, chairman of the EFPC executive committee, who formally opened the Academy, welcomed all pharmacists in attendance, and thanked them for their participation. *"It gives me great pleasure that the European Federation of Pharmacy Chains has been able this year to add this project, long in the making, to the portfolio of its activities. It is not too early to say that the Academy has fulfilled its chief purpose – forging a bond among active pharmacists from all countries. The rich discussions of everyone on the various topics are proof that we've sorely lacked this kind of project; we shall carry on and develop it further,"* said Daniel Horák, presenting the new EFPC project.

The Czech Republic was represented by pharmacists from the Dr. Max and Benu chains who demonstrated the state of play in the Czech pharmacy sector and the way in which it operates. Their summary of the modus operandi of Czech pharmacies, and the wealth of services offered by them, triggered a lively discussion among those present in the auditorium.

"It was a very pleasant surprise for our foreign colleagues to learn about the breadth of services offered at Czech pharmacies; most questions that were asked did in fact concern these services. People were interested in the training received by pharmacists, in the premises on which such services are provided, and in whether there exist any restrictions due to government regulations. The biggest surprise for people was to learn that these services are not covered by insurance (as they would be,

if administered by a medical doctor), but that we offer them for free or on a self-payer basis," explains Matěj Nižnik, an Academy participant.

"Through the comparison with other countries, I realized for myself the liberty which we as pharmacists enjoy here, and the variegated character of the services we provide – which is by no means a given fact in other countries in the same way it is here. Personally, I believe that Czech patients could no longer imagine their pharmacy without the current range of services," adds Nižnik, and mentions a number of examples: Rx reservations, the option to operate an online store, and the mail-order distribution of OTC products (which is outlawed in a number of countries).

He said he was impressed in turn by the presentation given by Polish pharmacists, who told the story of how they began to vaccinate clients against Covid-19 during the pandemic at pharmacies, and followed up by administering also flu shots.

"It was my immense pleasure to present to our colleagues the vaccination procedure at Polish pharmacies – since last year, this is a new, and at the same time the only, complementary service which we may offer to patients at pharmacies. I and my colleagues demonstrated the entire process by which we got into vaccinations – from legislative theory to preparation and roll-out. I also gave colleagues a few tips and tricks from my personal perspective, in the event that their national laws principally allow for vaccination by pharmacists," shared her impressions Anita Jeglińska, a Dr. Max pharmacist who became the first-ever pharmacist in Poland to administer a vaccine.

Conversely, the Hungarian colleagues from Benu pharmacies reported how they reel under the ban of online store operations and of commercial activities by pharmacies of any kind. *"For many of our colleagues, the Hungarian regulatory framework for pharmacies was a bit of a shock; aside from the demographic and geographic restrictions, they enquired about the regulation of pharmacy ownership, and in particular about the chief pharmacist's 51% ownership quota and veto right. This topic fielded the majority of questions,"* summarizes András Nagy. *"We also presented how the work of pharmacists is being made more complicated by the restrictions on expanding the available range of goods at any given pharmacy, and the ban on loyalty programs, ostensibly designed to ensure that all patients are being served on equal terms,"* adds Zina Branyiczki, another Hungarian pharmacist.

The work of her Hungarian peers was admired by Zdenka Bobor Bartošová, a pharmacist from Slovakia whose presentation of the Slovak market caught the audience's interest when she described the voluntary membership of Slovak pharmacists in the professional chamber.

"Hungarian pharmacists have earned our unconditional respect for their poise in fighting government regulations and decrees such that they are still able to offer quality care to their patients. I feel similar admiration for our Serbian colleagues, who have been able to keep up functioning pharmacies in spite of extremely low regulated margins on medicinal products."

Low margins were also the topic of the representatives from Romania, who at the same time face the issue of an acute lack of graduates and active pharmacists. *"We do have ten pharmaceutical faculties in Romania, but the number of students who graduate from them is smaller from year to year and*



interest in the study program is continuously declining. This finds its expression in a shortage of staff in practice, and is leading to a stagnation of the pharmacy market in Romania, preventing us from offering supplementary services at pharmacies – we are simply unable to procure the workforce necessary to cover such services," described the problem Catalina Ilinca, a pharmacist from the HelpNet chain.

The shortage of medical personnel was also the topic of a presentation by Tomáš Šebek, a Czech physician and proponent of telemedicine who showed how the problem may be resolved using modern technology. He also presented cutting-edge approaches to examining patients remotely with the aid of technology, the regulatory hurdles which stand in the way of further development of such modern approaches, but also the potential risks inherent in them. A discussion ensued during which a unanimous consensus emerged among the participants that the further growth of telemedicine is needed and important also from the point of view of pharmacies, provided that efforts are being made at the same time to educate patients.

In the light of the positive response by the participants and their express wishes, the representatives of the European Federation of Pharmacy Chains have already resolved to put the next few months to good use by planning the next meeting in the series for 2023, to be held in another member state.

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