

EUROPEAN PHARMACY CHAINS ON THE FRONT LINE IN FIGHTING COVID-19

The results of a survey conducted in June by the European Federation of Pharmacy Chains (EFPC) shows that pharmacies provided healthcare to patients in Europe while it was restricted or completely unavailable during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thanks to rapidly adopting a variety of safety precautions, pharmacies were able to remain open and continue serving patients. In some regions, pharmacies remained the sole available providers of healthcare.

Prague, 8 July 2020 – As many as 97.5% of pharmacy outlets of European operators of pharmacy chains stayed open during the COVID-19 pandemic and continued to provide primary healthcare to patients. The data have been published by the European Federation of Pharmacy Chains based on a questionnaire survey. According to respondents, the most important measures included introducing strict hygienic requirements for both staff and patients and modifying the opening hours.

"During the pandemic, chain operators had to show a considerable degree of flexibility. Many of them had to introduce new pharmacy services virtually overnight in line with the laws in effect in their respective countries in order to deliver services to patients who were quarantined or self-isolating. Another group were vulnerable people who had to stay at home for safety reasons," explained Daniel Horák, the Chairman of the European Federation of Pharmacy Chains. In this regard, one fifth of European pharmacy chain operators reported that they introduced home delivery of medicinal products.

In connection with the COVID-19 pandemic, debates have begun in many countries regarding amending the law to allow new services, such as Rx online, vaccination in pharmacies, and using pharmacy outlets as accessible contact points in the prevention of future pandemics.

All respondents from the ranks of pharmacy chain operators stated that in order to continue providing service, they had to adopt strict, costly measures to protect not only patients, but also, and more importantly, pharmacy staff. The most frequently implemented measures included safe distancing requirements between patients as well as between patients and staff members. As many as 80% of the measures taken consisted of procuring and regularly distributing personal protective equipment for pharmacy workers. Protective devices included facemasks, respirators, gloves, safety goggles, and face shields. The cost of personal protective equipment was paid for by pharmacy chain operators with the exception of the Czech Republic, where protective devices were distributed to pharmacists employed by pharmacy chains by the Ministry of Health through their employer while the cost was paid by the government.

Unfortunately, due to 50% of the adopted measures, the availability of some pharmacy services was restricted. *"Most pharmacy chain operators stated that they restricted services involving direct contact with patients, such as measuring blood pressure or blood sugar and providing advice regarding dermatology products."*

Despite the difficulties, 30% of the respondents see the current situation as an opportunity that will lead to positive changes in the development of pharmacy services in their countries. Conversely, 30% consider the current situation a threat to the local pharmacy sector.

The survey included 10 organizations (pharmacy chain operators and pharmacy chain associations) from seven European countries.

Zdeněk Blahuta
Executive Director

*The **European Federation of Pharmacy Chains (EFPC)** is the only organization representing pharmacy chains in Europe. The EFPC is an independent, voluntary, and non-governmental organization that cooperates with and promotes partnerships among national European associations in dealing with key issues relating to the pharmacy sector.*