

LIBERALIZATION: A WAY TO IMPROVE PATIENT COMFORT

The European Federation of Pharmacy Chains (EFPC) has organized an international conference titled "Pharmacy Care – Towards Beyond". Held in the Czech capital Prague, the event featured presentations delivered by experts from the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and Sweden. The main topics debated included pharmacy ownership, healthcare availability and quality, and the shortage and education of pharmaceutical professionals. A separate block was reserved to pharmaceutical innovations.

Prague, 17 October 2019 – The conference provided pharmacy operators and various other stakeholders, including representatives of tertiary academic institutions, with a unique opportunity for an open discussion about the current state of the European pharmacy sector and its future development.

Johan Wallér, CEO of the Swedish Pharmacy Association, presented the pharmacy market deregulation model that has been successfully implemented in Sweden. Most of the main objectives of Sweden's effort to implement a fully competitive scheme have been fulfilled, such as extending the opening hours, including weekends, improving the local availability of care, including rural areas, increasing distribution efficiency, and reducing the prices of over-the-counter pharmaceuticals.

Despite expectations, however, competition has not resulted in lowering the prices of prescription drugs. Among other benefits, market liberalization in Sweden has been conducive to the growth of strong market players. Apart from the state-run Apoteket pharmacy chain, which counts 394 outlets, there are 388 pharmacies operated by the private chain Apotek Hjärtat ICA and 327 outlets run by the Kronans Apotek chain. Consumer satisfaction with the functioning of the pharmacy market is high.

On a five-point scale, where five corresponds to the highest rating, 80% of Swedes rate the market with four to five points. The Swedish market is also undergoing rapid development of electronic prescribing, an effort advocated by another speaker – Max Müller, Chief Strategy Officer at DocMorris, the biggest online pharmacy company in Europe. Müller stressed that more and more patients are ready to use virtual pharmacies and expect them to be available. He also presented Promofarma, a project involving one of the largest European electronic pharmacy marketplaces.

Gábor Báthory, a Hungarian delegate from the Van Bael and Bells Law Firm, focused on the legal aspects of ownership. He pointed out various unresolved issues, such as the extent to which restrictions are justified on already liberalized market and conditions under which regulatory measures may be imposed. In addition, he mentioned nationalist trends that have recently emerged in some Central European countries, and spoke about the degree to which government restrictions should be allowed to place foreign operators at a disadvantage and what measures can be considered discriminatory. Another issue he examined was the legitimacy of state protectionism to place restrictions on organizations established under laws formerly in effect.

Healthcare expert Peter Pažitný from the Slovak consultancy Pažitný & Kandilaki compared the Czech and Slovak pharmacy markets, pointing out that pharmacies are the most affordable health facilities in both of the countries. At the same time, he mentioned the key features of the Slovak pharmacy sector, such as the implementation of generic prescription drugs, anti-export measures, and the emergency system.

Daniel Horák, CEO of the Dr.Max Czech pharmacy chain and Vice President of the Association of Pharmacy Chains, compared the quality of services provided in chain-member and independent pharmacies in the Czech Republic, pointing out that inspections carried out by regulatory authorities in pharmacies associated in APLS-member chains have identified fewer deficiencies than in the rest of pharmacies on the market. Likewise, APLS-member outlets account for the highest share of pharmacies that receive the highest ratings

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and achieve year-over-year improvement. Horák also remarked that the quality of services provided by pharmacy chains has been recognized by regulatory authorities in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Doina Draganescu from the Carol Davila University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Bucharest, Romania stressed that the pharmaceutical profession involves both specialized education and continual adaptation to ongoing economic and political changes. She pointed out that pharmacists have numerous options as regards professional career, thanks to which the pharmaceutical profession no longer has the status of a "second-choice career".

They need, however, to acquire numerous skills pharmacists were not required to possess until recently, particularly those relating to pharmacy management. Another person who examined the content of education programs was Ján Kyselovič from the University of Veterinary Medicine and Pharmacy in Košice, Slovakia. He focused on modern ways of educating pharmaceutical professionals about innovative pharmaceuticals. Their effect is directly proportionate to the quality of education delivered to university students.

The conference was well received by both delegates and industry professionals, encouraging the EFPC to plan organizing another edition next year.

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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.