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Spring 2021

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PHARMACIES RISE TO THE CHALLENGE DURING COVID-19

**Filling gaps in public health bodes well
for pharmacy's future**

BY MARK CARDWELL



During the onset of COVID-19, Victor Wong says his pharmacy team became the only frontline healthcare providers still accessible in the area.

Community pharmacist/associate-owner Victor Wong didn't feel brave or heroic when the COVID-19 pandemic first hit the Ontario capital in March 2020. "Overnight safety became a real concern. We immediately put up barriers and enacted protocols to try and keep everyone safe," he says, noting that it was challenging to keep the shelves stocked as pharmacies became the few places where people could procure everyday items and over-the-counter drugs.

As medical clinics closed, hospitals restricted access and appointments with primary care specialists all but evaporated, Wong and his pharmacy team based in Scarborough, Ont., suddenly became the only frontline healthcare providers still accessible to people in the community. Many of whom needed life-saving prescription drugs or had other health concerns.

But it was during the darkest days of the pandemic that Wong saw community pharmacists and pharmacies shine their brightest. "Our accessibility really came to the forefront," he says. "When people needed help they came to us—and if we couldn't help we referred them to the right place."

To help deal with the surge of demand in successive waves of the pandemic, provincial governments across Canada moved quickly to extend pharmacists' scope of practice in areas such as medication management (including for controlled drugs), prescribing, testing for infectious disease (in Alberta and Ontario) and vaccination. New billing codes for virtual care also allowed pharmacists in some provinces to connect with and care for patients like never before.

"The pandemic expanded our reach into the community as a hub of healthcare. I think it has forever changed the traditional model of pharmacy as simply dispensing pills and advising people how to take them," says Wong.

To be sure, the frontline efforts and expanded practice scope of community pharmacists during the ongoing health crisis have garnered widespread public praise and shone a spotlight on pharmacists' skills and capacity to play a leading role in public health in Canada.

Now, as COVID-19 vaccination campaigns roll out, pharmacists and pharmacy groups at the national, provincial and community levels are hoping to consolidate the profession's hard-earned gains and accelerate the pace of change by removing barriers that prevent pharmacists from fully delivering their roles in various areas of practice.

Outstanding issues include remuneration for many pharmacy services, increased scope of practice for the management of chronic diseases like hypertension and diabetes (including the authority to order and interpret lab tests), diagnostic testing for illnesses such as strep throat and urinary tract infections (UTIs) and access to patient information (e.g., electronic health records).

Public health providers

Christina Tulk, Chair of the Canadian Pharmacists Association (CPhA) and associate-owner of a Shoppers Drug Mart in Corner Brook, Nfld., says pharmacy's national association is gathering evidence and advocating that

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exemptions currently in place to enhance pharmacist scope remain even when COVID-19 is firmly "in the rear-view mirror." One example of this is CPhA's Pharmacist Opioid Stewardship Initiative, which is advocating for pharmacists to continue to play a greater role in the management of opioid therapy.

CPhA is also pushing for pharmacists to do more in the public health realm overall, says Tulk, such as point-of-care testing, health education for patients and disease management and prevention. "I had the opportunity to participate in the point-of-care [HIV study](#) run by Debbie Kelly [Clinical Director, Medication Therapy Services Clinic and recipient of a [CFP Innovation Fund](#) research grant in 2020] and experienced first-hand the appreciation from individuals who took part and were able to access this kind of care in the community."

Tulk points to a national [Abacus Data survey](#) in September that found 70% of Canadians see pharmacists playing an essential role in the healthcare system. That is a nine-point increase over results from a similar pre-pandemic poll conducted in February 2020. "We are a vital resource for patients and the most accessible healthcare professional—often the only healthcare professional in some communities."

According to Tulk, a major barrier facing pharmacies is the inconsistencies between provinces regarding expanded scope of practice and proper remuneration for services rendered.

"For the most part there is coordination between provincial pharmacy advocacy and pharmacy regulatory bodies," she says. "But often governments are slow to respond to requests to expand the scope of practice and there is also a

lack of consistent reimbursement models.” The result is “increased pressure on pharmacy teams to do more with less, which may result in a lack of motivation for pharmacists to add expanded scope to their practice,” she adds.

Sandra Hanna agrees. An Ontario-based pharmacist/owner and CEO of the Neighbourhood Pharmacy Association of Canada, she says governments need to make the changes and investments to support the provision of critical services by pharmacists and pharmacy technicians that patients can access conveniently, helping to lighten and manage the load on primary care physicians and hospitals.

“Fortunately, we’ve seen progress in scope expansion during the pandemic,” says Hanna. “For the system, the benefit is that pharmacy teams have the skill and public trust to give vaccines and deliver high-quality primary care and public health services.”

She says the COVID-19 vaccines present an opportunity to support pharmacists’ ability to work to full scope and to provide the resources necessary to enable that. “One of pharmacy’s core strengths has always been our accessibility and person-centric care close to people’s homes,”

says Hanna, noting that 95% of Canadians live within five kilometers of a community pharmacy. “It’s important to be aligned for the common goal of patient safety.”

She also points to collaboration between healthcare providers as being essential to providing high-quality care in everything from common ailments and chronic disease management, to supporting patients taking high-cost specialty medications.

The pandemic has both underscored and facilitated the value and benefit of enhanced interprofessional care and collaboration—something Hanna says pharmacists can point to in future discussions with physicians and other primary-care stakeholders. “We don’t want to alienate prescribers,” she says. “As long as we collaborate, we can ease the burden placed on physicians and support better screening and follow-up in patients with chronic disease who may not be seen as often.”

At the provincial level, leaders of pharmacy associations say the fearless response of their members from day one of the pandemic has had many positive results for both the system and the profession.



“Right out the gate COVID-19 showed pharmacists to be the reliable and resilient healthcare providers that people have always known we were.”

“Right out the gate COVID-19 showed pharmacists to be the reliable and resilient healthcare providers that people have always known we were,” says Margaret Wing, CEO of the Alberta Pharmacists’ Association and current President of the Canadian Foundation for Pharmacy.

“When doctors’ clinics closed and people couldn’t access professionals in the healthcare system anymore, they turned to us because we were still there, we were still open, and we were still accessible,” she says.

According to Wing, the pandemic helped to accelerate the pace of change in community pharmacy on several fronts even in Alberta, where pharmacists have the largest scope of practice in North America, including prescription authority since 2007.

In addition to the introduction of new billable services for assessments related to screening and testing for infectious diseases, including

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testing specifically for COVID-19, Wing says the biggest change in pharmacy in Alberta has been the shift to virtual care using platforms that incorporate the use of video conferencing and other communication technologies such as appointment booking apps. “Virtual care is here to stay and is something that will continue to evolve, keeping pharmacists accessible to patients for many years to come,” she says.

What's next for pharmacy?

Justin Bates, CEO of the Ontario Pharmacists Association, says the pandemic provided pharmacists with opportunities to deliver and provide access to new and additional health services in a safe and timely manner.

One big change has been COVID-19 testing, says Bates. “This demonstrates how the lanes of healthcare are converging with public health, primary care and medication management,” he says. “Pharmacists can do more in regards to scope of practice and deliver a positive return on investment.”

Bates says the Ontario government’s expansion of its vaccine rollout strategy to include 1,500 pharmacies by the end of April “is the most salient example of the role we can play

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“The pandemic has made everyone more aware of the important role pharmacists play in the public healthcare system. Pharmacies remained open, our members put safety measures in place quickly and we extended meds when doctors and other health professionals couldn’t be reached.”

in the system in a collaborative way with our healthcare colleagues.”

According to Bates, the stock of pharmacists and pharmacies has never been higher in the eyes of Ontarians as a result of the pandemic. That grassroots public support may also translate into political support for the expansion of pharmacists’ scope of practice, enabled by a progressive regulatory framework and reasonable funding.

“By remaining open and providing additional services we have managed to become part of the dinner table conversations across the province about the importance of pharmacies and the role they play,” says Bates, noting that the on-demand model of accessing services in a pharmacy is unlike anything else in the healthcare system.

“You could spend millions of dollars on a publicity campaign to

explain the key roles that pharmacists and pharmacies play in community healthcare. But it wouldn’t have anywhere near as much an impact as when people saw it for themselves on a daily basis during the pandemic.”

In Quebec too, where some 1,500 pharmacies were giving the COVID-19 vaccine as of late April—along with other expanded services including prescribing for minor ailments and extending prescriptions—pharmacists are basking in the glow of public appreciation. They ranked number one on the list of most-trusted healthcare providers in Quebec, according to [a recent poll](#).

“The pandemic has made everyone more aware of the important role pharmacists play in the public healthcare system,” says Pierre-Marc Gervais, a long-time community pharmacist in down-

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town Montreal who joined the Association québécoise des pharmaciens propriétaires (AQPP) as Senior Director of Pharmaceutical Services in January 2020. “Pharmacies remained open, our members put safety measures in place quickly and we extended meds when doctors and other health professionals couldn’t be reached.”

According to Gervais, that pandemic performance has made government more receptive to pharmacists’ demands. In January, for example, the government exempted pharmacists’ services from the co-pay and deductible requirements of its universal drug plan.

“We’d been pushing for that change since June 2015,” says Gervais. “People would go to the hospital to avoid having to pay shared fees. It was unfair and a barrier that stopped a full extension of services.”

He credits the pandemic for helping to galvanize public health decision-makers into action. “It was always hard to reach government officials, but now we talk with them two or three times a week,” says Gervais. “They are more aware of what we do and how important it is, and they’ve learned that when we say something we deliver.”

What matters most

For Vancouver pharmacist Bob Mehr, who owns 16 pharmacies with 48 pharmacists under his Pure Integrative Pharmacy banner in B.C., the accolades and gratitude that pharmacists received publicly and privately during the pandemic will leave the most indelible memories once the crisis ends.

“We became community heroes,” says Mehr, a compounding pharmacist and industry leader who



B.C.-based Bob Mehr believes governments and other providers will be more receptive to pharmacists as public health service providers.



“We became community heroes. We were open every day, filling prescriptions and providing services. We put our lives on the line to help people and they appreciated it. We heard it from them all the time.”

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combines a holistic and integrative health model with traditional pharmacy services. “We were open every day, filling prescriptions and providing services. We put our lives on the line to help people and they appreciated it. We heard it from them all the time.”

He says the dedication of pharmacy staff brought a sense of calm to the dispensary and united team members. “It created a special bond that other people saw and felt and it helped them too,” says Mehr.

Going forward, he believes governments and other healthcare professionals will be far more receptive to the notion of pharmacists as critical providers of frontline public health services. “We were there from day one and people had access to pharmaceutical care throughout the pandemic,” he says. “We have the expertise and people trust us, which should empower us more. Our role is changing from dispensers to educators and I see a very bright future for our profession.”



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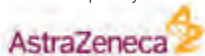


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