

The UK Covid-19 Inquiry

Written submissions of the National Pharmacy Association (NPA) for the preliminary hearing in Module 3 on 10 April 2024

Introduction

1. These submissions highlight a small number of issues that the National Pharmacy Association (NPA), as the membership body that represents the majority of independent community pharmacies in the UK, believes are relevant to the Inquiry's consideration of the issues under investigation in Module 3 and should be explored within the Module 3 hearings:
 - a. The central role played by community pharmacy in local communities and in addressing health inequalities.
 - b. Community pharmacy was overlooked and under-recognised during the pandemic.
 - c. The resilience of the community pharmacy sector in addressing a future pandemic.

The central role played by community pharmacy in local communities

2. Community pharmacists are trusted healthcare professionals, situated in the heart of their local communities, including within the most deprived areas of the UK. They have a unique understanding of the health needs of the population and communities they serve, and they play a vital role in reducing health inequalities. A local pharmacy is one of the few places within the health service where patients can walk in off the street and get treatment and healthcare advice without an appointment.
3. Immediately before the pandemic (2019/20), community pharmacy dispensed 1,046 million prescriptions in England, 106 million in Scotland, 82.1 million in Wales, and 41.8 million in Northern Ireland.
4. During the pandemic, community pharmacy acted as a first port of call for many patients and the NPA's members experienced a substantial increase in the number of patients seeking advice for more serious health or mental health conditions. 98% of pharmacies reported having to deal with increased enquiries about serious health conditions.
5. Community pharmacies were central to the provision of healthcare services and the supply of medicines to local populations and to the people who needed them most. Community pharmacy delivered medicines to large numbers of vulnerable patients in self-isolation during the pandemic, in circumstances where they would otherwise struggle to access health services and medicines.

6. Many medicines became difficult to source and expensive, as demand outstripped supply. In Northern Ireland, for example, the prices of medicines were even higher when compared to those in Great Britain. A number of medicines became unavailable, and members of staff spent long hours sourcing medicines.
7. Community pharmacists and other healthcare staff worked tirelessly during the pandemic and there was a significant impact on pharmacists and their teams in maintaining services at the height of the pandemic, including stress, fatigue and mental health issues. The role played by community pharmacy during the pandemic provided crucial support and resilience to the healthcare system.
8. The NPA asks the Inquiry to consider whether government made sufficient investment in integrating community pharmacy into the rest of the health system with appropriate infrastructure to support effective cooperation.

Community pharmacy was overlooked and under-recognised

9. The NPA's experience is that community pharmacy was not considered alongside other NHS service providers, which led to community pharmacy not having the support it needed throughout the pandemic.
10. For example, PPE was not initially available to community pharmacy through the NHS, and many pharmacy teams needed to source and fund their own PPE. People who worked in community pharmacy were not initially recognised as key workers that would allow their children to attend school while they worked.
11. Covid-19 testing was not initially available for community pharmacy staff, and community pharmacy was initially categorised as a 'retail setting' as opposed to a 'healthcare establishment', which meant that entire pharmacy teams needed to self-isolate following a single positive case within the pharmacy. This resulted in fewer available staff and increased pressure on remaining pharmacists and pharmacy teams.
12. However, the most significant and demoralising example of the difference in treatment of community pharmacy was their initial exclusion from the life assurance scheme in England. The NPA would ask that the circumstances in which this exclusion came about are fully investigated by the Inquiry.

The resilience of the independent community pharmacy network

13. The pandemic clearly showed that pharmacies are an essential part of health and social care. However, community pharmacy entered the pandemic facing hardship and a financial crisis, and this position has deteriorated further since the pandemic.
14. Due to long-term under investment in the community pharmacy network including funding cuts to the English community pharmacy contract in 2016

and a new community pharmacy contractual framework in 2019 that resulted in a reduction in funding in real terms, community pharmacy faced significant challenges in responding to the pandemic.

15. Community pharmacy also experienced a workforce crisis entering the pandemic where the attrition rate in community pharmacy far exceeded the recruitment and retention rate of pharmacists and pharmacy teams. Difficulties in recruitment and retention were particularly acute in rural areas, such as the Highlands of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, and the rural counties of Lincolnshire and Cornwall. This increased the difficulties in maintaining staffing levels and providing services to patients during the pandemic.
16. Since that time, real term funding cuts have continued, and the independent community pharmacy sector finds itself in a worse situation than at the outset of the pandemic. Independent research suggests that around 75% of community pharmacies are operating at a loss and the network is shrinking. Pharmacies are closing at an alarming rate – approximately eight pharmacies per week – and in England, there are 1,000 fewer community pharmacies than at the start of the pandemic (almost 9% less).
17. A strong community pharmacy network is an essential element of health care services in UK and the NPA would encourage the Inquiry to consider the role of community pharmacy in future pandemic planning and in the resilience of the UK's healthcare system.

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