



Pharmacist: A Frontline Warrior Against Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

As the COVID-19 and lockdown are being observed all over the world and the national level pharmacy professionals are come out as a frontline warrior and this write-up highlights the role of pharmacist in the COVID-19 pandemic. Pharmacists play the important role in healthcare professionals to the public, providing services amidst pandemic, including TRIAGE services; perceive patients, reducing the patient's burden on health care facilities such as hospital and good pharmacy practices. Pharmacist is also working to providing door to door services. Pharmacy associations have also issued their guidelines for COVID-19 and several examples of pharmacist's role in COVID-19 are being discussed. India is used as a country case study in this research paper. This article seeks to highlight the roles and activities of pharmacists relating to the public health response to help to reduce pressure on general practice and other areas of the health services.

Keywords

Pharmacist, COVID-19, TRIAGE, hospital pharmacist, community pharmacist

INTRODUCTION

Pharmacists and Covid-19 pandemic

Through public preventative measures advocated by WHO, the public are working together in their respective countries to 'flatten the curve'. With a near enough global lockdown there seems to be an even greater dependence on pharmacists as the first point of contact to fulfil the public's healthcare needs. Pharmacies around the world are one of the few places that are kept open for public service even during the strict lockdowns¹. Community pharmacists and their teams are a vital healthcare provider during the outbreak; they remain on the frontline of public health by serving as direct points of access for their patients. Hospital pharmacists have an important role during the outbreak in infection control as well as patient care and support². Countries severely hit by pandemic are exceedingly facing overburdened Health facilities and shortages as well as burnouts of health care professionals.

TRIAGE service has emerged as a supportive modality in this time of crisis which includes pharmacists along with other primary health care workers³. A provision of COVID-19 trained health care professionals exists for supporting these services in the time of shortage of medical and nursing staff members and to increase the outreach of the service in Australia as well. The International Pharmaceutical Federation (FIP) has issued a pack of 10 summaries for guidance on COVID-19⁴. American Pharmacist Association (APhA) has also issued guidelines and resource documents for the strengthening and preparedness of the community pharmacies as front-line health care workers in the global health crisis⁵. Reliability of information and control of scare and misinformation are important concerns during the worldwide spread of the disease. Community pharmacists also continue to play their role towards public uninterrupted for regular supplies of medicines, as well as supporting governments⁶. For

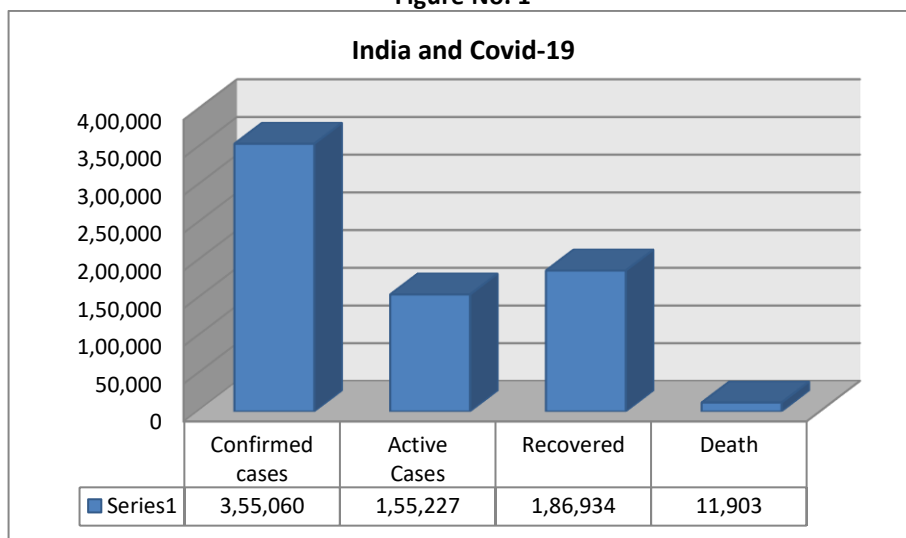
disseminating information on precautions related to COVID-19 spread including hand washing technique to availability of face masks and instructions for their proper use and disposal. USP has issued guidelines for the compounding and pharmacists and manufacturers for preparation of hand sanitizers to cope with the stock outs⁷. The community pharmacy has a unique credible role with ease in accessibility. In France, the campaign against domestic violence also involved the use of the code "Mask 19" to report domestic violence by the victims⁸. Pharmacists are an integral component of healthcare performing extraordinary roles in the earlier pandemics and health crisis, with some like Ebola and Zika posing global health security risks as well². Likewise, by contributing in the prevention, preparedness and response to COVID-19 pandemic community pharmacists are delivering their role towards public health in dealing with this crisis⁹.

India and COVID-19

As of 17 June, there are 332,424 confirmed cases, and 9,520 deaths & 169,798 recovered with COVID-

19 in India¹⁰. Since the first case reported on 29 Jan 2020, India has put in place its mitigation strategies which are framed around suspension of flight operations both international and domestic, social distancing, point of entry screening, contact tracing, clinical management of COVID-19 patients, Home Quarantine and Isolation & burial procedures for COVID-19 patients¹¹. To ramp up the efforts of containing the spread of COVID-19, the federal government imposed a partial lockdown on 24 March 2020 in which schools and pupil places are closed. Public transport is suspended. Public Hospitals are turned into isolation wards and the working class has been advised to work from home. Utility Stores, vegetables shops and dairy shops are opened but that too between specific hours. After re-evaluating the situation based on increasing cases within India, federal government has extended the partial lockdown on 1 Apr 2020 for two more weeks and extends from 14 April to still continuously conducted¹².

Figure No. 1



Pharmaceutical care framework of COVID-19 hospitalized patients for hospital pharmacists

After the diagnosis of COVID-19 infection, patients need to be admitted to designated hospitals for centralized and standardized inpatient treatment. Currently, no specific drug has been confirmed to treat COVID-19, and drugs of pre-approval access are still in ongoing clinical trials. The safety and efficacy of these medications remains unclear, and some drugs may cause serious adverse reactions¹³. Therefore, hospital pharmacists should actively participate in making evidence-based decisions for medications and assist clinicians in formulating and adjusting drug regimens of COVID-19 patients¹⁴.

Meanwhile, hospital pharmacists should provide close monitoring and evaluation of medication safety and efficacy, management of drug interactions, and monitoring and management of convalescent plasma therapy. Based on the characteristics of special populations and patients with underlying diseases, pharmacists should provide strengthened pharmaceutical care services. In addition, the emotional status of COVID-19 patients is also an important factor affecting the treatment and prognosis of the disease. It's necessary for hospital pharmacists to provide COVID-19 patients with emotional counseling and psychological support¹⁵.

Responsibilities of community pharmacist in COVID-19

Community Pharmacies should devise ways and techniques to enforce this for patients and even their staff. The pharmacy team should know what is to be done when there is a suspected case of COVID-19 infection. They should also have information on the measures of prevention, including details about disinfectants and proper hand and face hygiene (Facial T-Zone hygiene)¹⁶.

In absence of specific guidelines regarding the measures to be adopted for social distancing (in fact, physical distancing) by the community pharmacies, the approaches enlisted below can be and many of these are being followed by the pharmacies^{17, 18}:

- Placing physical barriers such as tables or chairs in the doorways or in front of the pharmacy counter to prevent patients from getting close.
- Dispensing medicines through a small window on the façade or door, like those usually used for night services.
- Putting plastic shield in front of the dispensing area.
- Putting some colorful markings or making boundaries with colored tape on the ground to designate the areas of the pharmacy where patients can stand for ensuring safe distance.
- Restricting the number of people who can be present in the pharmacy at any one time e.g. two in, two out. Another way is by locking the door for some time and then opening to limit the number of people entering the pharmacy.
- If you have a big pharmacy where the products are displayed at the patient/customer's disposal, then the access to these 'products on self-selection' should be restricted to avoid many people touching these products.

Economic effects on pharmacies during COVID-19 crisis in India

The response to this COVID-19 pandemic in the shape of social distancing requiring country lockdown and close of businesses is a death sentence to the low socioeconomic class in India¹⁹.

These economically pressured masses do not have much to spend on their health especially when the public hospitals have closed their OPDs for the public. With no where to go and no money to spend, they access their nearby pharmacies which can get them medical advice without paying for consultation and they only must pay for the medicine if it's needed. This could be a great window to showcase the role of community pharmacists in LMICs particularly during a time of a health emergency²⁰.

Development of the COVID-19 pharmacy guidelines

In India, majority of the pharmacists are engaged with the pharmaceutical industry, however there is a growing number which is now working in the community pharmacies or at retail pharmacies. While the organizations, authorities, hospitals were arranging personal protection equipment (PPEs) for doctors, nurses and paramedics, little attention was being paid towards the protection of pharmacy teams even though they are the first line of contact for the public in normal situation and even more in this COVID-19 pandemic with closing of public OPDs²¹. The COVID-19 guidance for pharmacy teams in India was endorsed by the Ministry of National Health Services, Regulation and Coordination (M/o NHR&C) and supported by The International Pharmaceutical Federation (FIP), The Commonwealth Pharmacists Association (CPA)²².

COVID-19 10 Step guidance for pharmacy teams

The features of the guidelines are:

1. Pharmacy Signage: Have a banner/standee at the pharmacy entrance advising patients not to enter the pharmacy if they are displaying any signs or symptoms of COVID-19. Signpost patients to contact the COVID-19 Helpline 1166 or to contact COVID-19 designated hospitals
2. Wash your hands: Regularly wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 s or use an alcohol-based rub. Use WHO 7 steps of hand washing technique. Provide Hand gels at the pharmacy counter for the public.
3. Self-Isolate: If you have a new cough and/ or a fever DO NOT come to work and self-isolate for at least 14 days and when symptoms get better
4. Social Distance: Maintain a 1-m distance between yourself and patients when taking in and giving out prescriptions. Consider restricting the number of patients who can enter your pharmacy at one time
5. Face mask: Wear a mask when in contact with patients. Change masks frequently. Disposable masks should only be used once.
6. Prescription Handling: Wear disposable gloves in the pharmacy. Ensure you change your gloves every time you handle a new prescription
7. Mobile Phones Rx Handling: Encourage patients to sanitize mobile phones with alcohol wipes available at the pharmacy counter, before you handle the mobile
8. Cash/PC Handling: Cash should be strictly handled with gloves and should be changed after every hour. Handling of medicines and cash should not be done by the same member of staff simultaneously. Use gloves to operate keyboards

9. Sanitation of Premises: All surfaces including appliances, shelving, medicines packaging, computers, telephones should be sanitized on a regular basis using a rota-system

10. COVID-19 testing: will only take place if:

- Recently travelled internationally
- Recently travelled Intercity and are showing COVID-19 Symptoms
- Been in-contact with someone who has recently travelled Internationally
- Anyone displaying COVID-19 symptoms: fever, persistent cough & Shortness of breath

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