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Pharmacists: a Resource to Prevent and Control Influenza Pandemic

Community pharmacists in Europe, through PGEU¹ members, are committed to making a major contribution to improving public health by seeking to ensure that people derive maximum therapeutic benefit from prescribed medication dispensed in pharmacies; providing high quality advice to ensure safe and responsible self-care including, where appropriate, self-medication; encouraging healthy lifestyles through effective health promotion and health education strategies. **In the particular case of the Influenza Pandemic, community pharmacists are an important resource for vaccination advocating and evaluating patients' immunization status. Moreover, pharmacists can be effective risk communicators while providing authoritative and trustworthy information to those under their care about evolving public health threats.**

Over 10 million people visit the community pharmacies in EU Member States every working day. Community pharmacies are recognised by members of the public as a vital, integral part of the health services in their country. They are also known to be conveniently accessible places where sound, objective advice on health issues can be obtained², from a knowledgeable health professional, in an informal environment in which they feel relaxed, without the need to make an appointment. In brief, pharmacies are obvious centres in every community for the effective transmission of public health messages.

Community pharmacists throughout the EU already make an important contribution by providing appropriate information, advice and support to people with questions about Avian Influenza, having therefore a vital role in educating the population about this important public health issue. Additionally, pharmacists have a central role in ensuring sufficient and appropriate supply of antivirals, dispensing it to already contaminated people and monitoring their treatment. Furthermore, pharmacists are a critical resource for enforcing prophylactic measures such as immunization, in particular to those with high risk of contamination as it is the case of health professionals.

All around EU countries community pharmacists, among other actions, complement oral advice with informative leaflets specially developed for certain groups of the population, for specific diseases, and for public health issues. In many countries, pharmacies have been key points for disseminating messages prepared by the National authorities individually or in collaboration with National Pharmacy Associations. Therefore, pharmacists can be effective risk communicators. Failure to communicate risks effectively may inadvertently increase public fears and undermine public confidence. Pharmacists are trustworthy and authoritative sources for disease and drug information and communicate information in such a way that empowers people to make informed and independent judgments about risks to their health and safety. This can range from dispelling myths about routine immunizations to communicating disease risk during a public health emergency such as a pandemic.

In relation to immunization advocacy, community pharmacists can ensure that vulnerable people are immunized against diseases that are the most significant sources of preventable mortality. This includes routine determination of immunization status (and referral for recommended immunizations), identification of high-risk groups requiring targeted immunizations, and, most important, protecting themselves and

¹ The **Pharmaceutical Group of the European Union (PGEU)** represents the community pharmacists of 29 European Countries. The Members of the PGEU are the professional bodies and pharmacists' associations in EU Members States, EU candidate countries and EEA Member States. PGEU objective is to promote the role of the pharmacists as key players in healthcare systems throughout Europe and to ensure that the views of the pharmacy profession are taken into account in the EU decision making process. To achieve this PGEU provides to its members an ideal platform to facilitate exchange of information, collecting and disseminating best practices. In addition it also encourages its members to further develop new projects aiming at anticipating and responding to society's needs, in the broader context of Public Health.

² Several European wide and national surveys show that pharmacists are highly trusted for their professional services (i.e. Reader Digest "Most trusted Professional services, 2005"). Moreover, the Council of Europe Resolution ResAP(2001)2 concerning the pharmacist's role in the framework of health security recognizes that pharmacists provide added value to the healthcare system both through their scientific and pharmaceutical expertise and in term of ethics.



those they come in contact with by being appropriately immunized. Community pharmacists can also be immunization facilitators and host others who immunize. Finally, consistent with national laws, pharmacists can become immunizers and assume an active role in protecting vulnerable people.³ Vaccine delivery by pharmacists is associated with higher immunization rates among those younger than 65 years of age receiving chronic drug therapy.⁴

Community pharmacists, through the network of pharmacies, are therefore a useful and highly accessible resource that should be used to its full potential in the development of Influenza Pandemic control and prevention policies and strategies.

³ American Pharmacists Association. Pharmacy-based immunization delivery, 9th ed. Washington, DC: American Pharmacists Association, 2004.

⁴ Grabenstein JD, Guess HA, Hartzema AG, Koch GG, Konrad TR. Effect of vaccination by community pharmacists among adult prescription recipients. *Med Care* 2001;39:340-8.