

Role of Retail Pharmacist during Covid 19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed significant threats to population health worldwide and confirmed the importance of retail pharmacists during this pandemic. In this article, it is possible to acknowledge the changes that have occurred to the roles of retail pharmacists, concentrating on their activities in dispensing medicine, patient counseling, and care during the pandemic. It discusses the problems that they encountered, which are lack of supplies of drugs, pressures in dealing with a large number of patients, and anxiety and fear of the clients. On the other hand, it explores the creativity of clients, which is comprised of the use of technology in coming up with teleconsultations, social distancing, and teaming up with health care centers. In the present article, the author focuses on illustrating retail pharmacists' role in enhancing access to and participation in meeting public health needs, especially in communities that are considered hard to reach. Moreover, it traces the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent effects on the future of retail pharmacy business and practice opportunities. This article discusses the importance of retaining and developing the input of retail pharmacists during the pandemic; this author argues that retail pharmacists should be prepared to deal with future public health issues.

Keywords: Retail pharmacists, COVID-19 pandemic, Patient Education, Community Health, Healthcare collaboration, Pharmacy innovation, Healthcare system

1. Introduction

COVID-19 has become one of the most critical threats to humanity in the twenty-first century, creating enormous pressure on healthcare organizations globally. This high infection rate affected the hospital, supply and demand the medical equipment and supplies and increased the demand for medical equipment, making the health sector transform quickly. Thus, retail pharmacists emerged as important frontline providers in the pharmacy profession and acted as the interface between a strained healthcare system and societies. They facilitate access to the most needed medicines, offer advice on some health matters, and assure continuity of a source of medicines during the unstable period. In pandemic practice, they assume additional roles, for example, providing information on the mode of transmission, shortage of drugs, and administering COVID-19 vaccines [1].

An exploration of retail pharmacists' contributions during COVID-19 is essential for the appreciation of their work and to identify their challenges and potential lessons to be learned. This paper elucidates how these healthcare professionals navigated this rapidly progressive change and the appreciation of

upholding community health during and after disaster, as well as informs the future of pharmacy practice during emergencies.

2. Evolving Responsibilities of Retail Pharmacists During the Pandemic

The subsequent COVID-19 pandemic significantly shifted the role of retail pharmacists from a limited-service provider to a partisan of the war against the virus. Specialization has its drawbacks for the efficient functioning of the whole healthcare system, as when hospitals and clinics are filled with severe cases of patients, retail pharmacists start to participate in dispensing medications and many more. Among the most significant shifts was their contribution to reducing the pressure on healthcare facilities. These retail pharmacists sustained medication administration and critical care services throughout the unprecedented, preserving care for patients with chronic illnesses, including diabetes and hypertension, without overloading overburdened hospitals. They are also responsible for seeking workarounds, establishing a supply chain, and communicating with patients and prescribers concerning medication deficiencies. The pandemic also extended their span of control. In more ways than one, their roles were stepped up during the pandemic period. Community retail pharmacists, in particular, took on educational roles by informing patients about COVID-19 inhibition measures, including using face masks, wiping hands, and maintaining physical distance. Once COVID-19 vaccinations started, they were vital in distributing them, especially to the less fortunate since they could not easily access essential healthcare practitioner services. Hence, they were critical in deploying and extending immunization due to their understanding of the challenge of vaccine uptake [2].

In addition, retail pharmacists offered direct access for patients with mild or no severe signs, thus decreasing their unnecessary flow to the emergency department. It also demonstrated that they could change and became all the more critical to the overall healthcare picture. The pandemic revealed the changing role of retail pharmacists, showing that they are multifunctional and dedicated to the community's wellbeing. Thus, by embracing new roles, they stressed healthcare systems and proved that more extensive community pharmacy involvement might help tackle emerging public health challenges [3].

3. Contribution to Public Health Efforts

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, retail pharmacists provided some of the most prominent service pressure by maintaining the continuity of relevant services and responding to the needs of society. Many of them went beyond their professional responsibilities and basic protocols of a pharmacist within a pharmacy and filled a crucial role for millions during an unprecedented pandemic. The critical role of retail pharmacists included dispensing medicines under tough difficult conditions. Restrictions, including the lockdowns, affected the supply chain significantly, and in developed nations, panic buying also compounded the problem by resulting in medication shortages. However, pharmacists continued to ensure that there was seamless continuity of supply of medicines in the face of challenges such as rationing, strain, and constraint of stock-outs – sometimes having to decode even the most fundamental challenges such as the need to source for better stock control for different medicines. It allowed their patients with chronic diseases to stay on their primary treatments, protecting their health during the pandemic [4].

Apart from drugs, retail pharmacists were crucial in distributing personal protective instruments (PPE) and products. We also got a hold of masks, hand sanitizers, and thermometers from local stores, again

targeting the vulnerable, including civil servants. They also ensured that these items were available, enabling them to slow the further spread of the virus within the communities. When vaccines finally emerged, many retail pharmacists provided the needed function in vaccine storage, distribution, and administration [5]. They ensured the vaccines were correctly stored and documented to avoid spoiled stocks through the negligence of some precaution measures. They have played an enormous role in helping administer vaccines, especially for those in hard-to-reach and rural areas, boosting immunization drives. And also in explaining public issues, providing correct information to counter fake news, and increasing citizens' trust in vaccines. Their dedication to the public's welfare enabled retail pharmacists to offer critical support, triage, and assistance with vaccinations. It continued to solidify the pharmacists' position as provide forces during emergencies. These enlightened analyses helped curb the development of COVID-19's effect on different people in different societies across the globe [6].

4. Education and Awareness

Community retail pharmacists had a unique function during the COVID-19 pandemic as the key intermediaries providing and sharing accurate information about health issues. Their activities in increasing awareness and advancing evidence-based practice have made a tremendous impact in containing the virus and enhancing people's health. One of retail pharmacists' responsibilities was to counsel their clients on measures to prevent and treat COVID-19. They explained definitive protection measures, including washing hands, observing facial cover, social distancing, and knowing signs of the virus. Patients with COVID-19 received information from pharmacists concerning medication adherence, symptoms, self-treatment, and needing medical treatment [7].

Another area that became another essential part of their work was eradicating vaccine doubt. So, folks canceled parties, protests, weddings, and funerals, wore masks or none at all, socially distanced or cocooned, trusted or rejected vaccines, sounded alarms, or slammed the panic button regarding COVID-19. Working in the roles of trusted community healthcare providers, retail pharmacists were in equal measure involved in these discussions to address these concerns. They promoted vaccine acceptance because of their loud and clear explanations of the benefits of vaccines and dismissal of myths. Furthermore, retail pharmacists pushed for the public to get vaccinated and are one of the most active groups in denying the dissemination of fake news regarding the pandemic. After demystifying falsehoods about miracle cures, they stepped up as the fine first line of defense against the infodemic. They also made a drastic turn to improve the quality of patient information and facilitated the delivery of factually correct, timely, and relevant information for patient-driven decisions. It is now apparent that retail pharmacists empowered communities in addition to helping people find their way through the labyrinth of the pandemic and when influencing education and awareness. Clearly, they were selling information and supporting prevention efforts, pointing out that they were educators and activists in the community [8].

5. Challenges Faced by Retail Pharmacists

The study indicates that the COVID-19 outbreak created many challenges for retail pharmacists, as discussed in **Table 1**. In different ways and daily, as frontline workers, these acted while attempting to sustain some critical services to meet the needs of needy individuals. Among them, the most urgent problem was a scarcity of drugs and other consumables. Factors such as contractions of the supply chain, stockpiling, and a higher consumption rate of some specific products like antipyretics, respiratory

products, etc, led to stock out. Patient expectations sometimes need to be more attainable, treatment changes must be suggested, and suppliers must collaborate to obtain essential drugs and personal protection equipment. Another challenge was that the amount of work being done also rose. In combination with the increased workload, retail pharmacists had more patient interactions during extra hours, which was additionally stressful. It also affected many pharmacies due to staff shortening for illness or quarantine. However, the Lau et al. study indicates that pharmacists continue to come through for communities, significantly offering essential services to some groups [9].

It also posed a relatively higher vulnerability for pharmacists to infection due to their direct dealings with the public through admixed interpersonal and enclosed settings. Although keeping their facilities safe for themselves and clients while continuing to serve the public meant their precautions included wearing the necessary protective gear and constantly sanitizing the pharmacy – all of which are a new and added responsibility. Another emotional stress emanated from handling the patient's anxieties, more so their aggressive dispositions. Stress and anxiety arising from Covid 19 were high, and this made the Pharmacists to be dealt with lots of aggression from the customers. Task realization involved responding to people's worries about medication supplies and reassuring those with apprehensions over public health interventions, amongst other pressures in which there was a need for the officers to bear the patient's face while handling the community with professionalism. However, retail pharmacists were remarkably dedicated and exhibited high work commitment and determination to the task. They showed the importance of their position in the healthcare delivery system and their care for the public's welfare when they demonstrated how they would overcome the impediments to the supply of crucial services during such a calamity [10].

Challenge	Details
Shortages of Medicines and Supplies	Disruptions in supply chains, panic-buying, and increased demand for specific medications led to inventory gaps. Pharmacists had to manage patient expectations, recommend alternatives, and coordinate with suppliers.
Increased Workload	Extended working hours and a surge in patient interactions placed physical and emotional strain on pharmacists. Staff shortages due to illness or quarantine exacerbated the workload.
Risk of Infection	Frequent interactions with the public in enclosed spaces heightened the risk of infection. Strict hygiene protocols, protective gear, and regular disinfection were necessary to ensure safety.

Patient Anxieties and Aggressive Behaviors	Fear and uncertainty about the pandemic led to increased patient anxiety, aggression, and frustration. Pharmacists had to handle emotional situations with empathy and professionalism.
Adaptability and Dedication	Despite the challenges, pharmacists continued to provide essential services and prioritized vulnerable populations, demonstrating resilience and commitment to public welfare.

Table 1 - Challenges Faced by Retail Pharmacists

6. Innovations and Adaptations

Retail pharmacists quickly engaged new approaches and changes to practice to maintain near baseline levels of service delivery and safety amidst the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic. These adaptations also ensured that communities could continue to receive healthcare services. At the same time, they demonstrated the adaptability of the community pharmacy business model during a crisis of global proportion, as explained in **Fig 1**. This digitization practice emerged as one of the key foundations of these innovations. Since social contacts were limited due to the pandemic, and there was a ban on most visits, many pharmacies introduced teleconsultation and online ordering services. Patients could contact the pharmacist, get medication advice, or ask for a prescription refill or other over-the-counter products without visiting the pharmacy. Thus, eliminating physical contacts minimized traffic and enabled patients, including the high-risk ones, to be served cost-effectively [11].

To prevent staff and patients from getting infected, security measures violating social distancing were enforced in retail settings of pharmacies. Shelf space in the pharmacy was redesigned to place barriers between customers, while in other stores, lines were created to minimize congestion. In the meantime, contactless payments and curbside deliveries were introduced, which minimized contact. These measures were employed to reduce the virus's positive mobility while maintaining critical societal operations. Another change was the cooperation between ICL and other healthcare consultants and with public health organizations. Retail pharmacists collaborated with physicians, hospitals, and other local departments, ensuring the drugs, PPE, and vaccines got to the rightful users on time. They also organized governmental campaigns, including immunization, disease prevention awareness, and many more, entrenching their position as crucial health players during COVID-19. Through these innovations and adaptations, retail pharmacists not only navigated the challenges of the pandemic but also contributed to the evolution of pharmacy practice, ensuring their continued relevance and impact on public health [12].

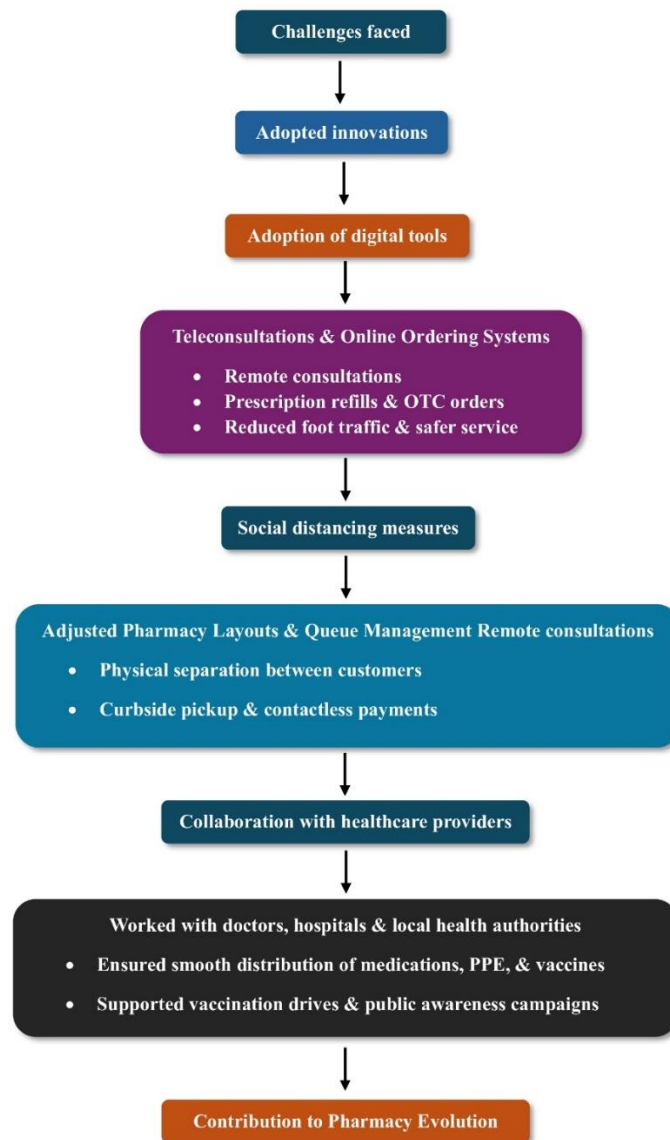


Fig 1 - The sequence of innovations and adaptations retail pharmacists employed

7. Case Studies/Success Stories

The COVID-19 pandemic presented store-level pharmacists with the opportunity to contribute massively to their communities as they demonstrated their flexibility and commitment to the well-being of people. One example can be explained by the experience of a chain of pharmacies located in rural areas where the availability of doctors is low. These pharmacists endeavored to give proper medication to the patients even during a shortage of stocks that at times reached its worst. They ordered home delivery services of treatments for the elderly and high-risk patients so that they could get their medicine without coming out of their homes to contract the coronavirus [13].

For example, a pharmacy in the central city has signed a cooperation agreement with the city's health bureau to hold the COVID-19 testing and vaccination campaign across the community. Retail pharmacists, with customers' trust being strong promoters of vaccination, could also mobilize vaccines, especially to the hard-to-reach individuals who could not easily access the central vaccination stations. It changed people's perceptions, improved vaccine uptake, and provided counseling from the preferred pharmacists. These examples demonstrate the activity of retail pharmacists in enhancing care during the

pandemic period. Community health is best served when change is embraced as opportunity and professional commitment to patient safety is honored; these attributes define them [14].

Conclusion and Future Outlook

The COVID-19 revealed the purposes and responsibilities of retail pharmacists as essential caregivers. Their capacity to learn rapidly, undertake added tasks, and guarantee constant availability of necessary services demonstrated the contribution of each one of them to public health. As the public face of the COVID-19 epidemic, retail pharmacists played a vital role in distributing medication, educating patients, and distributing vaccines and personal protective equipment. This has shown that it is crucial, through training and readiness, to equip the retail pharmacists for many more tasks in the future emerging disasters. How they could continue giving necessary medicines, imparting knowledge on COVID prevention to the public, and coordinating with other healthcare workers proved how well-developed community pharmacies are in large surges of health emergencies.

A more extensive degree of evolution of retail pharmacy practice is possible in the future. Suppose there is enough training, equipment, and backing. In that case, the role of pharmacists can expand even further to include more disease state management, screening, and a range of health promotion initiatives. How can communities continue to access quality care at the appropriate time now that the retail pharmacy has already been integrated more into public health? The current pandemic has created the backdrop for a new look at the potential of retail pharmacists and what they can contribute to society from a population health perspective.

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