

EDITORIAL**PHARMACISTS' ROLE IN COVID-19 VACCINATION**

The pharmacy profession has largely been quiescent with respect to vaccinations since time immemorial despite the critical role pharmacists play in other facets of healthcare. It is a well-established fact that pharmacists are more accessible to patients and health seekers in the community. Therefore, utilizing these versatile professionals in vaccination campaigns is likely to pay dividends both to the patients and government departments concerned with preventive health. Several countries have found it imperative to engage pharmacists in adult vaccination programs to achieve sufficient outreach and uptake among underserved populations.

The United Kingdom (UK) influenza vaccine initiative is demonstrative of the pivotal role pharmacists play in success of vaccination programs. This 'pharmacy initiative' was commissioned by the National Health Service (NHS) in 2013/2014 to utilize pharmacies as vaccination centres for increased vaccine access, improved patient healthcare choices and opportunity. Later studies on vaccination seekers revealed that pharmacies offered a convenient way to receive the flu vaccine with some actors suggesting they would pay out-of-pocket for the service rather than queue to receive it at primary healthcare free-of-charge.

In the USA, the role of pharmacists in expanding access to vaccines routinely and in pandemic contexts is well recognized. Individual pharmacy schools and the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) have mainstreamed vaccination training into the Doctor of Pharmacy (PharmD) program. The training requirements makes vaccination training and competence mandatory for accreditation of Pharmacy Schools. Pharmacists are therefore adequately empowered and qualified to administer a wide variety of vaccines including flu, zoster, pneumococcal, tetanus-diphtheria-pertussis, H1N1 and now COVID-19. Vaccination campaigns by pharmacists in the context of COVID-19 are very successful in the USA with a surge in job opportunities for qualified professionals.

One of the major barriers to vaccination is accessibility to the products which may hinder vaccine coverage. The number of qualified outlets and personnel to effectively and safely administer vaccines is limited in most communities. Under these circumstances, there is need to extend the scope of practice for pharmacists and nurses in the spirit of task sharing. For this purpose, there is a compelling need to integrate vaccination into the pharmaceutical services package. To this end, it is necessary to re-tool pharmacists for this non-traditional role through in-service training and curriculum review to mainstream emerging roles and opportunities. To ensure that the training is relevant, of immediate benefit and fit for purpose, it is prudent to perform needs assessment, identify competence gaps and adopt international best practices.

A crucial impediment to vaccine uptake is vaccine hesitancy. This usually occurs with a novel product like the COVID-19 vaccine whereby people adopt a wait and see approach. This may be exacerbated by prevailing belief systems and structures, ineffective public campaigns and inadequate counselling. COVID-19 vaccination is further complicated by uncertainties created by vaccine fast-tracking, definition of exempt and vulnerable groups and adverse drug events. Among the adverse reactions, blood clots (pulmonary embolism, deep venous thrombosis) seem to attract considerable attention which may lead to vaccine hesitancy. Pharmacists can provide the much-needed advocacy, education and surveillance to

ensure robust COVID-19 vaccine uptake and public trust. It should however, be emphasized that success of pharmacists-led vaccination campaigns heavily relies on a robust regulatory framework whereby only qualified pharmacists and outlets are authorized to undertake vaccination services.

All in all, it is highly beneficial to deploy pharmacists as providers of COVID-19 vaccination services. Pharmacies present a friendlier encounter with patients while pharmacists act as gatekeepers into the healthcare system and enhance vaccine uptake by communities. Pharmacies are also reputed for accessibility, walk-in services and extended opening hours. The COVID-19 pandemic is offering an opportunity to put a pharmacist's wide-ranging skills at the frontline of the pandemic. On the other hand, it is presenting a challenge for Pharmacy Schools that are not currently offering vaccination training to rise to the challenge and claim their position in the global stage.

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