

26 March 2020

Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP
Secretary of State
Department of Health and Social Care
39 Victoria Street
London SW1H 0EU

Dear Secretary of State,

We represent more than 30,000 pharmacists throughout the UK.

On their behalf, we would like to thank you for your recognition of pharmacists in your recent press conference. It is often easy for healthcare workers to be collectively referred to as 'doctors and nurses' in political shorthand. The reality as a result of COVID19 is that many healthcare professionals are on the front line – and we are keen to highlight that pharmacists in particular are as exposed as GPs, if not more so.

As hundreds of GP surgeries close their doors to patients providing only pre-screened and in many cases virtual appointments, pharmacists have become the front line and have maintained their accessibility to the public. As the most accessible healthcare setting it is under increasing pressure to provide advice in addition to medicine distribution. Despite the efforts of HM Government, PHE and the NHS patients are still going into pharmacies and displaying symptoms of COVID19.

We are concerned therefore that community pharmacy is not being provided with the necessary PPE to protect the pharmacy teams and that the advice issued by PHE is not sufficient to protect those working in pharmacy. The advice from PHE would be appropriate in normal times where many pharmacists would have limited physical contact with patients and could utilise PPE in those circumstances as per the advice. But we are not in normal circumstances. The front line is not general practice, it is now in community pharmacy where there has been more than 30% increase in visits by patients in this last week alone.

We are increasingly concerned at the risks being faced by our members and others in the pharmacy team, from patients with COVID19 whether they have symptoms or not and the inevitable contamination of surfaces and products in the retail environment. If pharmacies are unable to operate because of self isolation of staff, it will become impossible for the government to deliver on its support to the public and especially those who are vulnerable and shielding. Some community pharmacies have taken their own decisions to issue all staff with masks, gloves and aprons. They have erected plastic screens at the counter and limited the number of customers who can be in the store as well as requiring them to maintain a safe distance from pharmacy staff and each other.

To add to those pressures, some employers are failing to recognise the risks facing employees with one pharmacist recently exposing the instructions of a regional manager that “no masks or gloves are to be worn under any circumstances”. This failure to protect pharmacy staff cannot be allowed to continue. In contrast, Boots for example, have made clear that they will be providing PPE to staff with additional resources having been ordered.

The PHE guidance does not take account of the reality in many pharmacies today. Dispensaries are often too small to allow for social distancing, especially where extra staff are in place to deal with the massive increase in workload. For many staff, the increased risk is adding to their fear for themselves, their families and patients. This impact on morale is unsustainable at a time when pharmacy services are so desperately needed.

It is not only the pharmacists and their teams for whom we are raising concerns. Should a pharmacist catch the virus this places all of their subsequent patients at greater risk, and with the longest queues and the highest volume of dispensing on record community pharmacists are among those individuals who are now interacting with more people than at any other time.

It is also worth noting that anecdotally we are receiving information that where employers are supporting the wearing of PPE, especially masks, patients are changing their behaviour as they now see the staff as healthcare professionals, rather than retailers. This is helping to reinforce the much more positive role of community pharmacy during this crisis and becomes a consistent message especially when all other retailers bar essential providers have been required to close. It is vital that pharmacy is seen by patients as a core part of the health service.

We ask that you help to end this inconsistent approach to the protection of the pharmacy workforce and we urge you to ensure that all pharmacies receive sufficient quantity and quality PPE to protect them from infection and to ensure that PHE revises its guidance to take account of the risks now being faced by pharmacists in reality. This is not the time for community pharmacy to be the poor relation of front line healthcare support.

We stand ready to support the government and the NHS to ensure our members do all that they can to protect and support patients. We ask you do all you can to support our members and their colleagues too.

Yours sincerely,



Mark Koziol
Chairman

Cc Duncan Selby – CEO Public Health England
Keith Ridge – Chief Pharmaceutical Officer for England