



The Pharmacists' Defence Association's Response to the Home Office's Call for Evidence on Violence and Abuse Toward Shop Staff

June 2019

About the Pharmacists' Defence Association

The Pharmacists' Defence Association (PDA) is a not-for-profit organisation which aims to act upon and support the needs of individual pharmacists and, when necessary, defend their reputation. It currently has more than 28,000 members. The PDA Union was inaugurated in May 2008 and achieved independent certification in 2011.

The PDA is the largest pharmacist membership organisation and the PDA Union is the only independent Trade Union exclusively for Pharmacists, in the UK.

The primary aims of the PDA are to:

- Support pharmacists in their legal, practice and employment needs
- Represent the individual or collective concerns of pharmacists in the most appropriate manner
- Proactively seek to influence the professional, practice and employment agenda to support members
- Lead and support initiatives designed to improve the knowledge and skills of pharmacists in managing risk and safe practices, so improving patient care
- Work with like-minded organisations to further improve the membership benefits to individual pharmacists
- Arrange insurance cover for individual pharmacists to safeguard and defend their reputation.

Summary

The Home Office is calling for evidence on the problem of violence and abuse toward shop staff in England and Wales. It is asking for relevant evidence on the prevalence of it, prevention and support measures, the operation of the criminal justice system and best practice ways of addressing it.

The consultation runs from 5 April 2019 to 28 June 2019.

Foreword

The PDA represents pharmacists, pre-registration pharmacists and pharmacy students, many of whom work some or all of their hours in community pharmacies.

It is important for the government to consider that some people who work in retail environments are providing NHS services. The front-line role of pharmacists and their co-workers leads to exposure to aggressive, abusive and violent behaviour because they are in regular and frequent contact with the public, often when the patients and customers are under some stress – including where caused by medical conditions or the medicines patients are taking. Pharmacies continue to be a target for criminals looking to obtain money or drugs, and pharmacy staff have been subject to armed robberies and threats. [1]
[2]

Regretfully, our members tell us that they feel some community pharmacist employers tend to trivialise verbal abuse and are slow to prohibit or ban patients / customers from their stores. They don't feel that staff are fully supported by such employers. This can lead to a normalisation of aggressive and intimidating behaviour. We even hear reports that patients/customers who have been abusive to pharmacists have been sent vouchers or gift baskets to appease them, despite the pharmacist following the legal, ethical and correct procedures to report abuse.

Anecdotally, this approach from employers appears most prevalent in large corporate businesses. The government must work to reverse this.

The focus of this consultation is an important area for pharmacists, pre-registration pharmacists and pharmacy students. We lobbied for those groups to be included in the Emergency Workers Act 2018, and the definition of emergency worker in the act includes:

“j) a person employed for the purposes of providing, or engaged to provide—

(i) NHS health services, or

(ii) services in the support of the provision of NHS health services,

and whose general activities in doing so involve face to face interaction with individuals receiving the services or with other members of the public.” [3] [4]

Questions

We have answered the questions with the greatest relevance to the remit of the PDA.

Prevention and Support

Q6: Please provide examples of any preventative measure which you have used or considered using, including any evidence of how effective these have been.

The PDA has developed a Violence in Pharmacies resource pack for pharmacists. This received the backing of Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care in Wales, Vaughan Gething AM. It has been distributed in hard copy in Wales and Northern Ireland and also electronically to our members in the UK.

The pack is for owners and employers, employees and locums. It provides information on how to reduce and manage the risk of violence in pharmacy in the first place – as well as what to do in the event of a violent attack occurring. By outlining and encouraging the implementation of appropriate risk management measures, the pack can contribute significantly to personal safety. We have included a copy of it with this submission.

In addition, the PDA has developed A Safer Pharmacies Charter; this includes various safety principles and we invite employers to commit to meeting them, in order to improve both patient safety and the physical safety of staff. Principle 7 of the Charter is *“Pharmacists will not have to work in the pharmacy alone and will have access to the necessary support at all times to perform their roles. Risks will be assessed and preventive measures put in place so that patients and staff are safe – and can feel safe. A zero-tolerance approach will be taken to violence or abuse of pharmacists and other pharmacy staff.”* In 2018, we conducted a survey which asked pharmacists how often this commitment had been met in the past six months. In community pharmacies, 21% said “all of the time” and 40% said “around half the time or less”. By comparison, in hospital pharmacies, 39% said “all of the time” and 21% said “around half the time or less”. [5]

Many organisations have added their support to the charter because they too want to see safer pharmacies. The Labour Party has endorsed the charter, as has trade union USDAW, the BPSA, patient safety charity Action against Medical Accidents, the Pharmacist Cooperative and Health Campaigns together. [6]

It is difficult for us to evaluate how effective these interventions have been. We have outlined the difficulties with gaining commitment from pharmacy employers to adopt these initiatives, elsewhere in our response.

Q7: Are there any non-legislative preventative measures which the Government/businesses/the police or others could put in place, for example, to raise awareness? Please provide examples.

The PDA would advocate the government disseminating an anti-violence resource pack specifically designed for pharmacies, and would be pleased to assist if it decides to do so.

Q8: Are you aware of training/guidance/support which is provided to staff on how to handle potential or actual incidents of violence and abuse? Please provide examples, including any evidence of how effective this has been.

Please refer to our response to question 6.

Best Practice

Q20: Please share any examples you have of best practice, for example, of partnership working between the police and businesses, or deterrent measures which have reduced incidents of violence and abuse toward staff working in your organisation. This can include examples from outside England and Wales (please specify where).

In NHS hospitals and in some retailers, “zero tolerance” signage is displayed, outlining to the public that violence, abuse and threats towards staff will not be tolerated. We believe this

message may be an effective deterrent to some would-be perpetrators, in part because it shows the employer is supportive of its staff.

Recommendation

The government must support the use of “zero tolerance” policies and signage to address violence, abuse and threats in community pharmacies.

In unionised workplaces, employers are required to work with union-appointed safety reps and set up safety committees. The PDA’s view is that they are safer than non-unionised workplaces. This is supported by evidence presented by the Trades Union Congress (TUC). [7]

Recommendation

The government must do more to promote unionisation in retail workplaces.

Q21: What, if anything, do you think prevents businesses, the police and/or local authorities from working in partnership to tackle this issue?

As outlined in our Foreword to this response, there appears to be a failure among some pharmacy employers, particularly in large corporate chains, to provide sufficient protection and support for staff against violence, abuse and threats. Anecdotally, conditions are becoming worse in some employers, with reported reductions in security guard cover at midnight-opening pharmacies, for example. Our members have told us that their employers are reticent to display “zero tolerance” signage in their pharmacies because they don’t want to give the impression to patients that there have been instances of violence in that pharmacy or within the company. Staff are being given secondary priority relative to the corporate brand and out-facing public image of the company.

Recommendation

The government must address the normalisation of violence, threats and abuse in some community pharmacy employers, and provide staff with protection. It must place requirements upon pharmacy business owners to conduct risk assessments and take sufficient action to mitigate the risks.

Q22: Is there any further non-legislative action which Government could take to help address this issue?

Please refer to our response to question 7.

References

- [1] “Robber Who Targeted Halifax Pharmacy Jailed For Over Three Years,” West Yorkshire Police, 11 January 2019. [Online]. Available: <https://www.westyorkshire.police.uk/news-appeals/robber-who-targeted-halifax-pharmacy-jailed-over-three-years>.
- [2] “Starbeck post office worker held at 'knifepoint' by hooded robber who threatened to stab her,” Harrogate Advertiser, 25 April 2019. [Online]. Available: <https://www.harrogateadvertiser.co.uk/news/crime/starbeck-post-office-worker-held-at-knifepoint-by-hooded-robber-who-threatened-to-stab-her-1-9731629>.
- [3] “Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018,” [Online]. Available: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2018/23/enacted>. [Accessed 21 June 2019].
- [4] The Pharmacists' Defence Association, “Press Release: Bill to protect NHS workers from assault recognises plight of pharmacists,” 17 November 2017. [Online]. Available: <https://www.the-pda.org/press-release-bill-to-protect-nhs-workers-from-assault-recognises-plight-of-pharmacists/>.
- [5] The Pharmacists' Defence Association, “PDA releases patient safety survey results,” 30 March 2019. [Online]. Available: <https://www.the-pda.org/pda-releases-patient-safety-survey-results/>.
- [6] “A Safer Pharmacies Charter,” The Pharmacists' Defence Association, 2017. [Online]. Available: <https://www.the-pda.org/safer-pharmacies-charter/>.
- [7] Trades Union Congress (TUC), “How unions make a difference on health and safety - The Union Effect - A TUC guide to the evidence,” February 2016. [Online]. Available: https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/Union%20effect%202015%20%28pdf%29_0.pdf.