



# **PGEU STATEMENT**

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## **COMMUNITY PHARMACISTS: AN ESSENTIAL RESOURCE FOR THE CONTROL OF PANDEMIC INFLUENZA**

Approved by the General Assembly on 17 November 2009

## Community Pharmacists committed to helping control the progression of the H1N1 Influenza Pandemic

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Influenza Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 is spreading across Europe and, although the situation has been so far manageable, it potentially presents very serious challenges for European health systems.

The Pharmaceutical Group of the European Union<sup>1</sup> warmly welcomes the initiatives that the European Commission, through the ECDC and EMEA, has undertaken in this particular area, as well as the many national initiatives that are underway. However we would like to raise awareness about the additional resource community pharmacists represent in the prevention and control of an Influenza pandemic.

In addition to the continuous support community pharmacists provide in prevention and control of seasonal influenza every year, community pharmacists are also an important resource for providing information and supplying antiviral medication and vaccinations to the population in the case of a pandemic situation.

**We believe that the resource represented by Community pharmacists should be used to its full potential.** Although in some countries competent authorities have invited community pharmacists to participate in the development and implementation of national pandemic preparedness and response plans, the level of overall involvement has significant potential for further development. In this respect we would like to refer to the EuroPharm Forum report, published in March 2009, on *The Role of the Pharmacist in Fourteen National Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Plans in Europe: An Analysis*<sup>2</sup>. The report allows an overview of the functions which could be assigned to pharmacists.

We hope this PGEU statement will open new avenues for expanding ongoing initiatives both at national and European levels and serve as a basis for future steps in integrating all existing resources in the common goal of protecting European citizens' health.

### How can Community Pharmacists contribute?

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#### **Health information and education**

Community pharmacists are often the first point of contact for the public when presenting with symptoms and they have a pivotal role in advising patients and referring them when required to their doctor.

Throughout the EU, community pharmacists already make an important contribution to health information and education by providing appropriate information, advice and support to people on avoidance and treatment of both seasonal and A H1N1 Influenza, having therefore a vital role in educating the population about this important public health issue. This can range from dispelling myths about routine immunizations to communicating disease risk and public hygiene measures during a public health emergency such as a pandemic.

In many countries, pharmacies have been key points for disseminating messages prepared by the National authorities individually or in collaboration with National Pharmacy Associations. Pharmacists are trustworthy and authoritative sources for disease and medicines information and are trained to communicate information in such a way that empowers people to make informed and independent judgments about risks to their health and safety.

Besides the provision of information at pharmacy level, health education in schools and other community organisations can be another effective way of improving awareness of H1N1 related issues where pharmacists can contribute.

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<sup>1</sup> PGEU represents around 400,000 community pharmacists from 30 European Countries, including EU Members States, EU candidate countries and EFTA members.

<sup>2</sup> <http://europharm.netapotek.dk/file/11608>



### ***Distribution of national antiviral stocks reserved for a pandemic situation***

Community Pharmacies are the most widely dispersed and accessible health facilities in Europe. In a pandemic situation, antivirals will need to be distributed to patients within hours of the onset of symptoms. In light of their accessibility and proximity to the population, and, for example in case of potential travel restrictions and other emergency measures, it is therefore essential for community-based pharmacists to be involved in the dispensing of antivirals in addition to and complementing other distribution channels competent authorities believe to be appropriate.

In addition, community pharmacies' capacity to formulate and distribute extemporaneous (magistral) preparations of oral antivirals has to be taken into account. The recommended dosages of oseltamivir (oral antiviral to be used in the case of an H1N1 pandemic<sup>3</sup>), require the preparation of magistral formulations for which community pharmacists are well prepared and qualified to do in their pharmacies. It is relevant to mention that involving community pharmacies in the formulation and distribution of magistral preparations is probably one of the most cost efficient ways to supply the population with these preparations in a pandemic situation.

In many cases, patients infected with H1N1 will need additional medicines, such as for example non prescription medicines to alleviate muscular pain, fever and cough. In addition, patients with chronic conditions will need to continue their regular treatments. If parallel systems of distribution are in place, patients will be obliged to go to different places to get their medicines. Moreover, community pharmacists play an important role in ensuring patients will be given appropriate advice on the range of medication they are taking while allowing the identification of possible interactions, side effects and or adverse reactions associated with the antivirals.

Failing to take advantage of the existing available professional medicines expertise provided by pharmacists as well as the network of pharmacies and their place in the logistics of medicines distribution may potentially result in unnecessary delays and confusion.

### ***H1N1 vaccines***

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 those they come in contact with by being appropriately immunized.

Community pharmacists can also work as immunization facilitators and host others who immunize. Finally, where this is possible under national law, pharmacists can become immunizers and assume an active role in protecting vulnerable people<sup>4</sup> (e.g. in Portugal, pharmacists are already involved in population vaccination for seasonal influenza; and in Ireland, pharmacists are being trained to provide H1N1 immunisation). Vaccine delivery by pharmacists is associated with higher immunization rates among those under 65 years of age receiving chronic drug therapy.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Vaccination of Community Pharmacists***

As health professionals who will certainly be exposed to risk of infection due to the level of interaction within the population, it is reasonable and necessary to include community pharmacists and pharmacy staff within vaccination priority lists in order to ensure the provision of pharmaceutical services to the population will not be disrupted. It is vital that during a pandemic, the supply chain for all medicines continues to function.

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<sup>3</sup> Updated review of influenza antiviral medicinal products for potential use during pandemic by the Committee for Medicinal Products for Human Use (CHMP) of the European Medicines Agency (EMA), Doc.Ref.: EMEA/CHMP/592102/2007, London, 13 December 2007, <http://www.emea.europa.eu/pdfs/human/pandemicinfluenza/59210207en.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> American Pharmacists Association. Pharmacy-based immunization delivery, 9th ed. Washington, DC: American Pharmacists Association, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> 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.



## Conclusion

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The field of expertise and practice of Community Pharmacists, allied to a unique capacity of population outreach, can bring an additional resource to reinforce the “whole-of-society” approach to pandemic influenza preparedness and response envisaged by the World Health Organisation<sup>6</sup>. Our activity can complement and reinforce other health professionals’ work in this field, both in the provision of reliable information, prevention and control, serving as an important link within the chain of continued and integrated care.

PGEU believes that community pharmacists, through the broad network of pharmacies throughout all EU Member States, are a useful and highly accessible resource that should be used to its full potential in the development and implementation of Influenza Pandemic control and prevention policies and strategies. It is essential that the role of community pharmacists is fully recognised within national contingency plans, as information providers, distributors of antivirals and vaccines, and in some countries administrators of vaccines.

In pandemic situations, PGEU believes we cannot afford to under utilise the public health infrastructure and expertise at our disposal.

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<sup>6</sup> Pandemic influenza preparedness and response: a WHO guidance document, WHO, April 2009

