Digitalisation needed to shape and support future of UK's pharmacy sector

NHS waiting lists and staff shortages understandably grab the headlines, but alongside and less publicised is both a decline in the number of pharmacies and, importantly, that shortages of medicines are putting patients at risk.

Temps de lecture : minute

20 December 2022

For pharmacies, the need for effective and affordable solutions is paramount if they are not to fall further behind both digitally and financially. They need support when they are unable to digitise on their own in order to free up time for pharmacists to focus on valuable work, such as consultations and testing. With the innovation in healthcare technology, opportunities are being created for pharmacies to play a bigger role in patient treatment.

The rationale is compelling given the health consequences of an _NHS waiting list that extends to over 7 million_ and more than _130,000 unfilled health sector vacancies_, excluding care homes. But nine in ten pharmacies also report _staff shortages_. It is noteworthy too that the number of community pharmacies in the UK is shrinking, down by 110 in 2021/22 to 11,522 – well below a pre-Covid figure of _11,826 in 2019/20_.

More alarming than the number pharmacy closures is that, according to a recent survey by _The Pharmaceutical Journal_, more than half (54%) of pharmacists say that a shortage of medicines have put patients at risk "in the past six months." Greater use of technology offers a means to help

alleviate at some of the supply issues.

Pharmacies at risk amid funding cuts

It's fair to say that these supply issues are unlikely to go away soon without transformative action. The National Pharmacy Association in September warned that up to 3,000 pharmacies are at risk of closure by 2024 following years of _flat NHS funding and double-digit inflation_.

With the NHS under so much pressure, greater use of healthtech while harnessing the reach of community pharmacies that can play a bigger role in patient treatment makes sense, particularly as more than 35 conditions are no longer being prescribed medication by GPs. Yet, at present many smaller community pharmacies lack online services. With such services, pharmacists could handle repeat prescriptions and do online consultations. Processes could be simplified helping to make healthcare more accessible for patients.

Indeed, some pharmacies could adopt a hybrid digital and in-person model, such as click-and-collect or delivery apps. Time-saving processes are also important, such as shared digital supply records of medicines or patients with GPs.

Consultations and testing, as with GPs, could be adapted for remote care and prescriptions. With pharmacists now having the power to refer patients to cancer specialists based on red flag symptoms, improving the availability of such care is essential.

Increasing access through technology

Healthcare accessibility is a big challenge in the UK, with many patients living in remote areas or in regions where GPs are oversubscribed. Furthermore, _over a third of pharmacies that have closed in the last six_

<u>*years have been in the most deprived parts of the country*</u>. Delivering digital services can help rectify this, and tackle inequalities and improve accessibility across the country.

One platform helping with digitising community pharmacies is <u>*Charac*</u>, which uses technology to assist with a variety of healthcare services, including advertising, booking appointments and ordering prescriptions.

Platforms such as Charac's patient management system consolidate individual patients' prescription and consultation records, making the lives of pharmacists, patients and even GPs easier. Charac has worked to improve the supply of medicine to patients – its integration with NHS IM1 and collaboration with Royal Mail enables pharmacies to order repeat prescriptions and even have prescription services delivered to patients' doorsteps.

Digital platforms can help simplify and modernise pharmacy offerings. That makes them increasingly important as high street stores disappear. Platforms such as Charac reduce pharmacist workloads, improve accessibility for patients, and help remove healthcare inequalities. Digitising community pharmacies is obviously not a fix-all for the NHS waiting lists, but greater use of technology would provide those marginal gains to help overall performance and that would help reduce those lists.

Santosh Sahu is the founder of <u>*Charac*</u>.

Article écrit par Santosh Sahu