Community Pharmacy Workforce's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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BACKGROUND

Community pharmacies are among the most accessible health care sites in the United States (US):

- Approximately 89% of the US population lives within 5 miles of a community pharmacy[1]
- The median number of visits to community pharmacies annually among Medicare beneficiaries is significantly higher than encounters with primary care providers (13 vs 7)[2]

Patient care services accessible at community pharmacies have expanded beyond medication dispensing, such as:[3]

Medication optimization

Chronic & acute care management

Wellness and prevention

Patient education

Community pharmacies responded to critical public health needs during the COVID-19 pandemic:[4]

- COVID-19 testing, vaccination, and therapeutics
- Non-COVID childhood vaccines

OBJECTIVE

To describe the community pharmacy workforce's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

METHODS

Participants

- Convenience sample of community pharmacy and pharmacy association leaders from across the US

Data Collection

- 15 interviews with 18 key informants from January – May 2022 using a semi-structured interview guide

Data Analysis

- Rapid content analysis of interview notes

FINDINGS

THEME 1: Patient care at community pharmacies focused on fulfilling COVID-19 response needs

"But pharmacies, for the most part, didn't close their door. They didn't lose their operations. A lot of them went… to service people either by delivery services or by bringing their materials to their car…" (Interview #2)

"…pharmacists are now administering COVID-19 vaccines… in addition, [pharmacists have been] able to do some testing to identify if a patient has [COVID-19] and then recommend therapy… and refer out if necessary." (Interview #7)

THEME 2: Pharmacists' history as immunizers & scope of practice expansions accelerated COVID-19 response

"There isn't one [industry] that could have responded in the way that community pharmacies responded… states that went all in on pharmacy early had an easier times rolling out [the COVID-19] vaccine and doing it at a pace that mattered." (Interview #8)

"I have a technician that became certified to [administer] vaccines… It's really freed up [time] and we would never have been able to do as many vaccines as we have done without technicians being able to [administer vaccines]." (Interview #12)

THEME 3: Workforce shortages & workload increases impeded COVID-19 response & contributed to burnout

"We're always chronically low on trained pharmacy technicians… With the opportunity for technicians [to administer vaccines], the timing was not exceptional because we were asking them to do training while working exceptional number of hours in a very stressful environment…" (Interview #14)

"It's [the need to receive] payment for services… if pharmacists can be paid for their expertise, the public would benefit, patients would benefit, the pharmacy profession would benefit… we wouldn't be on such thin margins… I think well-being would be better because we can be staffed appropriately." (Interview #7)

THEME 4: Maintaining community pharmacy workforce's readiness critical to future emergency preparedness & response

"The goal is to secure those gains that were extended under the PREP authority… I know the emergency authorization is still in effect… but it won't always be… [it's] really imperative to make sure that there can be consistency in the delivery of services throughout the country." (Interview #12)

"…the right thing to do would be to have that strong [government] partnership always… These were all new relationships we [had] to develop from the beginning… keep[ing] that alive [would] definitely make a great collaboration for a future effort." (Interview #4)

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DISCUSSION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the community pharmacy workforce:

- Embraced new roles to address public health needs
- Faced delays from the need to implement temporary scope of practice expansions and reimbursement pathways

As a result, the community pharmacy workforce's capacity for future emergency response needs review:

- Identify opportunities to institutionalized policies and needed resources
- Maximize professional satisfaction and support a strong, ongoing workforce

Limitations:

- The timeframe of data collection allowed participants to reflect on their experiences over time; however, their ability to recall events and experiences fully and accurately may have been affected
- A national sample of key informants representing multiple stakeholder groups were recruited and interviewed using open-ended questions to minimize the potential for participant and social desirability bias

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The community pharmacy workforce's ability to respond to ongoing and future public health emergencies could be improved by making the temporary scope of practice expansion and reimbursement policies deployed during the COVID-19 pandemic permanent

For more information

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