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HEALTHCARE, LIFE SCIENCES & PHARMACEUTICALS

# Coronavirus: Impact on the operation of pharmacies

Faced with the COVID-19 pandemic, the Portuguese National Authority for Medicines and Healthcare Products (“INFARMED”) and the Directorate-General for Health (“DGS”) have issued guidelines for pharmacies. These guidelines address, in particular, the way pharmacies operate and manage medicines.

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Technical guidelines have been issued that cover several essential aspects of the operations of pharmacies. These include guidelines on technical management, opening hours, temporary closure, supply of medicines, patient service, and dispensing of medicines in the pharmacy and at home.

**"It may become impossible for pharmacies (chemist's) to remain open due to a lack of pharmacists or professional staff and the inability to replace them with external personnel. If this happens, they must notify INFARMED about the need for temporary closure."**

Accordingly:

- The **technical management** can be provided by a pharmacist who is not a member of the staff of the pharmacy if the usual technical director or pharmacist cannot do this. In these situations, the pharmacist who provides the technical management is responsible for supervising the operations of the pharmacy and its properly qualified staff.
  - Pharmacy staff may not be available due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Therefore, to ensure compliance with the approved **opening hours**, the pharmacy can introduce different opening times that ensure the daily operation of the pharmacy and coverage in the locality. The new opening hours must be displayed clearly in and outside the pharmacy. They must also subsequently be communicated to INFARMED using the website *Portal Licenciamiento+*.
  - **It may become impossible for a pharmacy to remain open** due to a lack of pharmacists or professional staff and the inability to replace them with external personnel. If this happens, it must notify INFARMED about the need for temporary closure using the website *Portal Licenciamiento+*.
  - The **supply of medicinal products** to pharmacies should be preceded by additional hygiene measures. Whenever possible, the staff of the distributor/stockist must make their delivery of the order without going into the pharmacy. In addition, they must take steps to clean and disinfect the delivery crates of medicines and healthcare products before going into the pharmacy.
- With regard to **servicing patients**, it is important to note the following:
- In places where there is only one pharmacy within a radius of 2 km, it is recommended that the pharmacy should **dispense medicines through the service hatch** or, if there is no service hatch, without the patients coming into the pharmacy.
  - Pharmacies can **dispense medicines through the patient service hatch**. They can also ask patients to take a service ticket and then wait to be called in an **area marked out for this purpose** or **outside the pharmacy**.

- All pharmacies are under an obligation to **provide priority service**, in an organised way, with respect for the rules of hygiene and safety, to certain groups of people: These groups are: (i) the over-70s, (ii) people with weakened immune systems or chronic diseases, including hypertension, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer, (iii) healthcare professionals, (iv) members of the security, civil protection and emergency services, (v) members of the armed forces, and (vi) people who provide social support services. Information on this priority service must be displayed clearly and visibly.

When it comes to **dispensation of medicines**, the INFARMED guidelines are for pharmacies to manage stocks carefully and:

- Ensure the quantity of over-the-counter medicines sold to patients is appropriate to the symptoms of the specific case, the dosage, and the time the medicine is expected to be taken for.
- In dispensing prescribed medicines, follow the guidelines and not dispense excessive quantities of the same active substance at the same time. They should also give advice to the patient on the therapeutic indications of the drug, the importance of not interrupting the treatment, and the importance of meeting the needs of all patients in the current situation.
- Following the above guidelines – and as an exceptional measure during the COVID-19 crisis – the technical director, or pharmacist designated by them, should dispense prescription medicines to chronically ill patients even if they do not have a prescription. They can only do this for a maximum of three months and they must keep a record of any medicines dispensed in this way to ensure they can be traced. Moreover, the patient must be able to prove the existence of (i) the disease in question, and (ii) a previous medical prescription for the medicines requested.

**"Pharmacies must prioritise serving the over-70s, people with weakened immune systems, people with chronic diseases, health professionals, members of the security, civil protection and emergency services, members of the armed forces, and people that provide social support services."**

- A prescribed medication (or its therapeutic alternatives with the same INN, pharmaceutical form and presentation) may not be available for immediate dispensation or it may not be possible to acquire it in good time. In this case, the pharmacy should, if possible, contact the prescribing doctor to obtain information on a suitable replacement. The pharmacist may also select an available therapeutic alternative. This selection must be made from the therapeutic alternatives on the list of active substances to be published by INFARMED and agreed between the Portuguese Medical Association and the Portuguese Pharmaceutical Association. This replacement should be made in conjunction with the doctor who will subsequently send the electronic prescription for the medicine.

**"All pharmacies must have their own Contingency Plan and adopt their own procedures to cope with the COVID-19 crisis. These must allow them to deploy all measures considered necessary to face the crisis quickly and effectively"**

The following provisions apply to **medicines dispensed at home**:

- It may be necessary to take steps to ensure pharmacy services are available, especially in places where pharmacies are closed. For this purpose, **pharmacies can make home deliveries of medicines and healthcare products**. These deliveries can be made by pharmacies located in the same or in a neighbouring municipality, even if they have not registered in advance with INFARMED. Pharmacies that wish to provide this service but have not yet registered to do so must subsequently inform INFARMED and identify the municipalities in question. They must do this using the website *Portal Licenciamiento+*.
- To ensure the availability of pharmacy services, the medicine home delivery service can be provided using the SAFE Protocol (Pharmacy Assistance Service) through the designated helpline.

- In making home deliveries of medicines or health products, the person responsible for delivery should, as far as possible, avoid direct contact with the patient or their personal possessions.
- Community pharmacies can work with hospitals to make home deliveries to patients.

The guidelines issued also address the health and safety procedures that pharmacies should adopt to protect their patients and employees:

- Pharmacies must have their own contingency plans and adopt their own procedures to cope with the COVID-19 crisis. The plans must allow pharmacies to deploy all measures considered necessary to face the crisis quickly and effectively. They must also take into account the various possible scenarios and the guidance contained in Guideline 006/2020 of 20/02/2020, issued by the DGS).
- In preparing their contingency plans, pharmacies should consider a set of key issues and they should also implement measures to complement the ones contained in the plan.
- Pharmacies must have an isolation area with specific characteristics and materials in case a patient or staff member is suspected of being infected by SARS-CoV-2. If necessary, and in the absence of a designated isolation area, unlicensed areas adjoining the pharmacy can be used exclusively for this purpose. Provision is made for specific procedures to be adopted for patients/staff depending on whether they exhibit a very low or low risk of infection, some risk of infection, or if they may be infected by SARS-CoV-2.

- Pharmacy staff must have the necessary information on COVID-19 to be in a position to act in the event of a suspected case and to properly inform patients.
- Staff who come into contact with the public should receive appropriate training to be able to provide information to them and help them with their doubts about COVID-19. The information they provide should be in line with the official information published by the DGS. They should also advise patients to obtain information from the DGS communication channels or other official sources.
- For this purpose, all staff who deal with the public must be kept permanently up-to-date on certain specific issues associated with COVID-19.
- Pharmacy staff must make sure everyone is advised to follow rules of conduct to minimise their risk of being infected and of infecting other people.
- Pharmacies can also provide written information to their patients and display pictorial signs that make it easier to understand the advice being given. To do so, they should preferably use the materials provided by DGS on its website.
- The DGS guidelines must be displayed in a place where they can be seen easily by patients before they go into the pharmacy. Moreover, the DGS poster that informs people about the situations in which they should call the SNS 24 helpline should be displayed as close as possible to the entrance. In addition, signs should be displayed in bathrooms showing people how to wash and disinfect their hands.
- Pharmacy staff should take specific measures to minimise the risk of patients and their own risk of being infected by SARS-CoV-2.
- Pharmacies must ensure they have a specific set of protection equipment and materials that is properly listed, and healthcare professionals must use protective masks.
- Pharmacy staff should discourage people who do not have any symptoms from using “preventive” masks, except in specific situations where the use of masks can be recommended. ■

**"The technical director, or pharmacist designated by them, must dispense prescription medicines to chronically ill patients who do not present a prescription, for a maximum of three months. In doing so, they must ensure they record the dispensation so that it can be traced."**