

Growing shortage of community pharmacists must be addressed



The accessibility and convenience of pharmacies could be impacted - IPU

Immediate action is required to ensure that a growing shortage of community pharmacists does not impact upon patients. The Irish Pharmacy Union (IPU) has warned that attracting and retaining young community pharmacists has become increasingly difficult throughout the pandemic, which if it continues could impact the accessibility of pharmacy services in future.

Outlining the challenges faced by the sector, IPU Secretary General Darragh O'Loughlin said "Today approximately 3,800 community pharmacists work in over 1,900 pharmacies across the country. They play an increasingly vital role at the frontline of healthcare in Irish communities and are Ireland's most trusted and most accessible healthcare professionals. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult for community pharmacies to attract and retain young pharmacists into the sector. If this is allowed to develop it could impact on patient care in the future.

There are several causes for this shortage according to Mr O'Loughlin. "Most fundamentally, Ireland does not train enough pharmacists. There are currently only 240 places in pharmacy third level courses, which is insufficient to meet employment needs. Community pharmacies also face increasing competition for graduates from other sectors such as clinical roles within

the HSE and research positions in pharmaceutical companies.

“Pharmacies are not like most businesses”, Darragh O’Loughlin explains. “If there is no pharmacist available or present, a pharmacy is legally not allowed to open its doors. The sector is now beginning to feel a real pinch due to this shortage.”

“If this situation is not addressed by the government and industry together there could be challenges down the line for patients. This could include shorter opening hours, closures on weekends and bank holidays, or pharmacies withdrawing ancillary medicine support services such as dose administration aids. Nobody wants to see this happen which is why action is needed today.”

The long-term solution according to spokesperson is education: “We have outsourced our education of pharmacists to the UK for too long. The newly formed Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science must play a role in supporting an increase of places for pharmacy education – it is essential to 21st century healthcare.”

“It takes five years to train a pharmacist, so this won’t be an overnight solution but it is a long-term imperative. We have sought a meeting with the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Simon Harris, to discuss how the broader pharmaceutical sector might support an expansion in the number of student places available to study pharmacy in Ireland.”

“More immediately, we have to make it as easy as possible for appropriately pharmacists from non-EU countries to relocate and work in Ireland. The IPU has raised this issue with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland (PSI), and we hope that progress can be made in this regard.”

The HSE and government could also assist in making the role of community pharmacist more attractive to pharmacy graduates, Darragh O’Loughlin believes. “Research commissioned by the IPU identified excessive red tape, administration and bureaucracy as among the biggest drawbacks to a career in community pharmacy. 98% of pharmacists now feel they spend too much time on paperwork, which means not enough time helping patients.”

“Implementing e-health initiatives such as fully integrated electronic prescribing and electronic health records would eliminate much of this burden. Ultimately the most significant change would be to follow through on the longstanding commitment to expand the role of community pharmacies. Expanding the range of healthcare services pharmacies can provide to patients would make this a more rewarding and attractive profession for highly skilled pharmacy graduates. This would help patients, the health system and the pharmacy sector in equal measure.”

In conclusion the Irish Pharmacy Union has called on Ministers Stephen Donnelly and Simon

Harris to work with them to develop a plan to ensure an adequate supply of community pharmacists to meet the needs of the Irish public and the health system now and into the future.