

Importance of Pharmacies has Increased throughout pandemic



39% say pharmacists are the most important healthcare professional

- Half of the adult population indicated that the pandemic has either had some or a significant impact on their health

The importance of community pharmacies has increased throughout the pandemic according to new research from B&A. The study, published by the IPU, found that with overall visits to GPs decreasing during the pandemic, pharmacies have grown in importance. 39% of people now see their pharmacist as their most important healthcare professional.

The 2021 edition of the Irish Pharmacy Index is the 15th annual study to quantitatively measure public attitudes to pharmacy in Ireland.

Key findings of 2021 study include:

- The number of people citing pharmacists as their most important healthcare provider has increased by almost a third;
- The majority of people (54%) visited the GP less often throughout the pandemic period, with many consulting with their pharmacist instead;
- Pharmacists play a much greater role in the healthcare of younger adults. Someone under the age of 25 is four times more likely to have been to the pharmacy in the past week

than a GP;

- Up to half (48%) of the adult population indicated that the pandemic has either had some or a significant impact on their health with the biggest impact being on younger adults;
- 85% of people see pharmacies as highly accessible and 57% believe they are increasing in relevance; and
- There is clear support for pharmacies expanding the range of services they provide, including 88% favouring the availability of vaccines in pharmacies.

Commenting on the findings, IPU President, Dermot Twomey said, “The role of the community pharmacy has been expanding and increasing in importance for many years. This accelerated during the pandemic as pharmacies kept their doors open during each lockdown. With people visiting GPs less, or GPs favouring virtual appointments, the accessibility of pharmacies is driving healthcare in our communities.”

The report found that 85% of people find pharmacies accessible compared to 51% for GPs and just 13% for hospitals. Furthermore, the longer opening hours typically offered by pharmacies were recognised, with 75% agreeing that pharmacies are available at a time that suits compared to just 31% for GPs.

Mr Twomey welcomed the exceptionally high levels of trust (97%) patients have towards their pharmacies by patients, “Pharmacists pride themselves in their personal approach to healthcare and supporting patients. The direct personal interaction allows us to provide valuable advice to patients in a quick and convenient way.”

Public support for expanding the role of pharmacies is very strong with 95% favouring pharmacists being allowed to prescribe medications for minor ailments. “The pharmacy profession stepped up during the pandemic in a big way. The sector has now administered more than 215,000 COVID-19 vaccines in just two months. Prior to that, when called upon and empowered to do so, we extended and repeated prescriptions for patients for up to nine months when other healthcare providers weren’t available, to ensure safe continuation of patients’ medication and to help manage their existing health conditions. Both are examples of how increasing the role of pharmacies can rapidly lead to successful results.”

Mr Twomey concluded by calling for a concerted government effort to maximise the value of the pharmacy sector in post-pandemic healthcare, “We are all optimistic that the crisis of the pandemic will recede in the coming months. Now is the time to plan for how healthcare will operate in future. Ireland’s 1,800 community pharmacies have the ability and experience to provide more services in order to help ensure the implementation of the Sláintecare goal of ‘care in the community’.

“The types of services which community pharmacists are ideally positioned to deliver include a pharmacy-based Triage Programme including a Minor Ailment Scheme and for women to be

allowed to access contraception directly from their community pharmacist without prescription.

“These services are being offered by pharmacies in other countries and the approach is working. It’s more efficient for patients and is more cost effective for the State.

“The public wants this and pharmacists want this. All we need now is for the government to take notice and to start availing of this huge potential.”