

Insufficient number of pharmacists impacting on patient needs



- **Risk of pharmacy closures and reduction in pharmacy services if immediate action not taken**
- **Major survey reveals it now takes an average of five months to fill a pharmacist position**
- **Pharmacists demand immediate action to address ongoing crisis**

14 May 2022 The Irish Pharmacy Union (IPU) has today warned that a growing shortage of pharmacists is fast becoming a major threat to community healthcare. A survey of over 1,000 pharmacists conducted by the IPU with the support of Behaviour & Attitudes (B&A), has shown that it is now taking an average of five months to fill vacant positions in pharmacies.

The IPU is calling on government to increase the availability of third level places in pharmacy, to include community pharmacists on the Critical Skills Work Permit List, while also working with the sector to eliminate the needless red tape, bureaucracy and administration that currently besieges the sector.

The findings of the B&A Members Survey revealed:

- The majority of pharmacists believe that there are not enough pharmacists in the system to meet patient requirements;
- It now takes an average of five months to fill a pharmacy position; and a third of vacant positions take between six and 12 months to fill with the impact most severe on rural pharmacies.

Speaking to IPU members at the IPU AGM in the Radisson Blu Royal Hotel in central Dublin, IPU President Dermot Twomey outlined the struggles being faced by pharmacies. “There are currently 3,800 community pharmacists working across Ireland’s 1,900 community pharmacies. With a growing and ageing population, we estimate there is a significant shortfall of pharmacists working in the sector.

“The impact of this shortage is increasingly apparent and pharmacies, the majority of which are small family-owned businesses, are struggling to keep their doors open.

“Community pharmacy is the standout success story of Irish healthcare. It is convenient, easy to access and affordable. A properly empowered, regulated and resourced pharmacy sector could deliver a revolution in community care. However, without concerted action to address this shortage pharmacies will close, reduce their hours, and reduce their services.

“Currently over 85% of people in Ireland can access a pharmacy within five kilometres of their home. Increasing staff shortages threaten the viability of many pharmacies particularly those in rural areas and if nothing changes people can expect to travel much further in future. Furthermore, the long opening hours and weekend availability will all be under review if pharmacies cannot hire the professional staff they need.

The Irish Pharmacy Union (IPU) has warned that attracting and retaining young community pharmacists has become increasingly difficult throughout the pandemic. If this pattern continues it could impact the accessibility of pharmacy services in the future. Not only that but existing ancillary services that are highly time consuming, such as creating individual patient medication regimes will not be possible in many pharmacies.

According to Mr Twomey, a chronic lack of university places for pharmacists is one of the main causes of this shortfall. “This research shows that approximately half of pharmacists working in this country qualified in Ireland. It is unacceptable in 2022 that a modern healthcare system must rely upon outsourcing education to other countries. We have been campaigning for more third level places in Ireland for some time, including the establishment of a new, additional school of pharmacy. It has now reached a crisis point and action needs to be swift.”

“More immediately, we must make it as easy as possible for 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). A first step would be to immediately include community pharmacists on the Critical Skills Occupations List, which will assist in increasing the number of potential candidates from third countries.”

The shortage is compounded by a ‘seven-year itch’ in the profession, which sees one in five practitioners leave within that time. This is a direct result of the onerous and entirely pointless bureaucracy that pharmacists must undertake daily. As explained by Mr Twomey, “The average pharmacist wastes a significant amount of time each working day on form filling such as doing paperwork for community drug schemes. These activities add nothing to patient care or clinical safety. It is the bane of every pharmacist’s existence and could be easily solved.”

In conclusion, Mr Twomey said, “Community pharmacists play a vital role in our primary health care system. However, we cannot continue to provide this service with inadequate numbers of qualified pharmacists. The Government needs to get serious about addressing this problem and to take immediate steps to increase the number of graduates, reduce unnecessary bureaucracy and ensure a steady flow of pharmacists from outside the country. The alternative will be a sector that remains in crisis with the resultant impact on patient services, patient safety and the threat of pharmacy closures.”