

Pharmacy Staff Must be Prioritised for COVID Vaccine

- **Faced with increasing risk, pharmacists demand information about vaccine rollout**

8 January 2020: Pharmacists are under unprecedented pressure as COVID-19 infection rates continue to rise but, despite the levels of exposure they are facing, they are receiving no Government support to help them fulfil their role. The Irish Pharmacy Union (IPU) says it is essential that the staff of Ireland's more than 1,800 community pharmacies are vaccinated in the earliest phases of the COVID-19 vaccine rollout. As infection rates reach unprecedented levels, the role of pharmacies in providing support and information within local communities is vital. However, pharmacy staff must be reassured that Government is hearing their calls for support, and more importantly, acts on them.

Calling for greater clarity, Secretary General of the IPU Darragh O'Loughlin said, "Frontline healthcare workers are listed as one of the very top tiers of the Government's vaccine allocation plan. Rollout of the vaccine has already started in hospitals and we have seen numerous images of hospital staff and doctors being vaccinated, which is very positive. However, pharmacies receive over one million visits each week from patients, many of whom are immuno-compromised or have serious underlying conditions, and pharmacists still have no information about how, when and where they might receive the vaccine.

"The pharmacy profession is wholeheartedly behind the Government on this vital national effort and pharmacists have stepped up and made changes to work practices and premises since the pandemic started. However, the lack of any commitment or apparent sense of urgency to protect this vital frontline healthcare service is deeply disappointing. It is leading to increasing worry, frustration and even despair across the profession."

"Pharmacies have faced unprecedented pressure since the beginning of the pandemic, coping with their own increasing workload and trying to maintain continuity of care for people struggling to access appropriate healthcare elsewhere", Mr O'Loughlin said. "While many other healthcare providers have closed their doors and switched to providing remote consultations, pharmacies remained open to ensure patients have access to their essential medicines and healthcare advice.

"Now that we have returned to some of the most stringent COVID restrictions, pharmacies continue to keep their doors open to the public, while many other healthcare providers continue to keep theirs shut. This is completely unsustainable, with pharmacy staff facing an ever increasing risk of infection. To ensure they can continue to provide safe care, they must be protected by vaccination at the earliest possible opportunity. This would also provide greater

comfort to patients who would expect that pharmacists attending to them have been vaccinated.”

Mr O’Loughlin concluded by calling for greater clarity on when pharmacies will be vaccinated and also when they will be enabled to administer the vaccine to their own patients. “Pharmacies are being asked multiple times every day for information about the vaccine. We have no information other than what is in the media and that needs to change. For many patients and communities, pharmacies are now the only providers of accessible in-person face-to-face health care. When others have shut their doors, pharmacies continue to provide services and, as a result, have seen their workload soar with zero support from the Department of Health. Given the risks posed by COVID-19 to vulnerable patients and to pharmacists and their staff, we cannot overstate the importance of pharmacy teams being prioritised for early vaccination.”

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