

Pharmacy Triage System Could Revolutionise Healthcare in the Community



- **Calls to end the underutilisation of Ireland's 1,900 Pharmacies**
- **Over 1 million GP visits could be avoided with new scheme**

20 September 2021 Ending the underutilisation of Ireland's 1,900 community pharmacies should be a post-pandemic priority, according to the Irish Pharmacy Union (IPU). The IPU has called for the immediate introduction of a new Community-Pharmacy Triage System within its pre-budget submission published today.

Pharmacies' importance to the public has grown significantly during the pandemic and, according to community pharmacist and IPU President, Dermot Twomey, it is time to double down and make this a permanent aspect of our healthcare system. "Pharmacies kept their doors open throughout each lockdown, while the majority of people are now visiting GPs less often. This has meant that two out of five people now cite the pharmacist as their most important healthcare provider, a sharp increase on previous years.

"Pharmacies are open at convenient times, most services require no appointment and half the

population lives within 1km of a pharmacy. This all explains why, with 1.5 million visits to pharmacies every week, it is the most accessed part of our health system. But despite years of promises, successive governments have failed to expand the range of services that pharmacies can provide.”

Community Pharmacy Triage System

The Programme for Government commits to expanding pharmacy services. However, in the absence of any indication that this will be delivered, the IPU has developed and submitted proposals for a Community Pharmacy Triage System. Such a system, as operates in many other jurisdictions, would comprise of three main services: use of emergency medicines, a minor ailment scheme and a minor injuries service.

Mr Twomey explained how a Minor Ailment Scheme would operate, “This would provide medical card patients with access to over-the-counter treatments free of charge and direct from their pharmacy. It would eliminate the need for GP visits for over 40 minor ailments including hay fever, migraine or common skin conditions.

“Minor ailment schemes operate successfully in many other countries such as the UK, Netherlands, Canada and Australia. The experience in Scotland shows us that it could eliminate one in 20 A&E visits and one in seven GP visits. With GPs consistently citing concerns over their capacity, at the stroke of a pen the government could free up over 1 million GP appointments a year.”

While the pharmacy profession is eager to do more to help patients it is essential that it is adequately resourced to do so. “Pharmacies cannot be expected to keep doing more for less. Last year pharmacists dispensed 81 million medications under state schemes and, despite this being a 3% increase, income remained unchanged. This is part of a longer-term trend that has inflicted €1.7 billion worth of cuts on the sector over a decade and has undermined pharmacies’ ability to continue providing the services that people need and want.”

“As the government moves past the pandemic crisis and seeks to reform the delivery of healthcare in Ireland, they have to get serious about realising the potential of pharmacies as providers of primary healthcare within the community. A properly empowered pharmacy sector could deliver a revolution in community care from 1,900 locations across the country. Pharmacists have been ready and waiting for years but need the government to match that ambition.”

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