



Preparing for the 'new norm'

As we continue to work through this extraordinary time of crisis and the ever-present threat that social distancing will become the norm for the foreseeable future, what can pharmacy do to prepare for the gradual removal of lockdown restrictions in our society? In this article Darren Kelly, IPU Business Development Manager and Clare Fitzell, IPU Professional Services Pharmacist, will provide some advice to members on how to prepare your pharmacy for the easing of lockdown restrictions and driving footfall back into your business.



The one thing we can be sure about over the coming months is that the public health situation will continue to change, and we will need to be prepared for this challenging environment and try to

remain as agile and adaptable as possible.

During the emergency, pharmacy was asked to continue its frontline work in ensuring that the people of Ireland received their medications and advice on their health, and to date

the sector has played an absolute blinder. All the sector – pharmacists, technicians, OTC and sales staff – should be applauded for their commitment and efforts to maintain our vital service to the public.

Preparing a business continuity plan

At the start of this emergency, we encouraged members to prepare a business contingency plan, considering the safety of your staff and yourself so you could continue to provide

Table 1: Risk assessment model

Severity of impact	Likelihood of occurrence				
	Very Unlikely = 1	Unlikely = 2	Possible = 3	Likely = 4	Very Likely = 5
Negligible 1	1	2	3	4	5
Minor 2	2	4	6	8	10
Moderate 3	3	6	9	12	15
Major 4	4	8	12	16	20
Extreme 5	5	10	15	20	25

essential services to the public. As part of this, many of you will have conducted a risk assessment either formally or informally and then introduced many mitigating measures to reduce these risks, for example introducing the use of Perspex screens on counters, implementing floor signage, and installing security pods at the front of the pharmacy. When you were preparing this contingency plan did you consider looking at a business continuity plan? Preparing a business continuity plan and completing a risk

assessment will help you to identify what you and your team need to do to minimise the impact of the emergency on your business. As the public health COVID-19 restrictions are eased, these documents will help you understand what mitigation measures you have put in place and if additional measures or steps need to be taken.

They will also enable you to understand the most efficient and safest way to bring customers back into your pharmacy. One of the most useful tools that you

can utilise for this exercise is conducting a structured risk assessment for all the activities that occur in your pharmacy. This will help you identify areas of highest risk and lowest risk, and this in turn will help you to assess which services can return sooner and which areas require additional risk mitigation measures to be put in place. A well-developed risk assessment will also allow you to reassess the risks as the situation changes over the coming months and can be a useful tool to engage your teams in all the measures

and considerations that you have taken.

Risk assessment models

There are many different models for risk assessment¹. The model above considers the Likelihood/Relevance and the Severity of the impact of the issue on the business and can be found in the NSAI COVID-19 Workplace Protection and Improvement Guide².

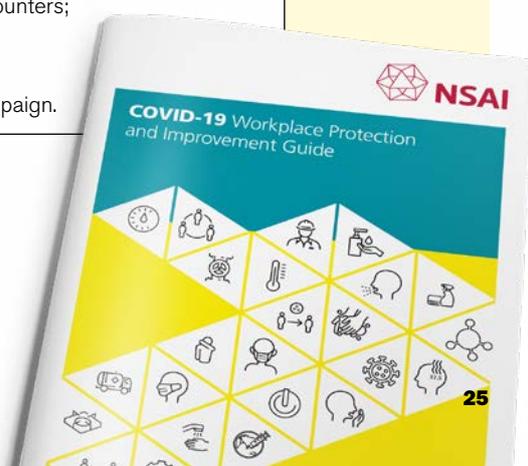
Those issues with the highest score are the most significant risks and justify the most significant attention.

Table 2: Example of an extract from a pharmacy COVID-19 risk assessment

Risk	Likelihood	Severity	Score	Mitigation Measures	Notes
Closure due to pharmacist need to isolate	3	5	15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Business Continuity Plan; IPU Locum list; Split workforce into two teams; Maintain social distance of 2 metres; Provision of masks to all employees; and Provide handwashing facilities/sanitisers. 	Need to keep up to date with latest HPSC contact tracing guidelines
Patient presenting to pharmacy with COVID-19 symptoms	3	4	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement signage at doorways; Station staff member at entrance to explain measures to customers; Media campaign to inform the public; and Encourage patients to phone ahead – social media campaign. 	Update as more information of asymptomatic spread is available
Patients not observing social distancing measures	3	3	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indicate 2 metre distance from counters; Signage on counters; Restrictions on entry; and Department of Health media campaign. 	

1. Additional information on conducting risk assessment in pharmacy settings can be found on the HSE website www.hse.ie. IOP run a training course on managing quality in pharmacy practice that looks at this process.

2. <https://www.nsaie/images/uploads/general/NSAI-Guidelines-for-COVID-19-2020-04-09.pdf>



In the example on the previous page, you will see how these risks may have changed over the last month. If we look at the social distancing risk in the above example, if you had assessed this at the start of the public health emergency you may have rated this higher, as the public were unaware of the concept of social distancing. We have rated the likelihood of this as possible now, but in the initial few weeks this would have rated higher at very likely. The impact of good mitigation has reduced this risk, so mitigation measures you had in place at the start of the public health emergency may now need to change based on the risk being reduced.

This exercise will be useful to complete and then revisit as public health restrictions ease or change and as our understanding of the virus develops, for example we now know that the virus is more contagious than originally thought. At the time of publishing, we are aware that the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) has just changed guidance in response to this and advised that all pharmacy staff wear face masks as part of the HSPC's ongoing risk assessment for health professionals. This guidance change may reduce some of your risks and increase others, and new mitigation measures like training in correct mask use, removal and disposal, may need to be introduced.

The risk assessment will be a valuable resource to help you plan and mitigate the impact of these changes as restrictions ease. It will also help you identify areas within your business where good mitigation measures can help you resume some level of retail activity whilst reassuring staff. You may wish to subdivide your risk register into different domains such as organisational, staffing, customer, financial and environmental.

These are business decisions that need to be made in communication with your team. Once the staff are updated on the plan then you can start to update your customers on the position of your updated pharmacy proposition.

We have seen great examples of mitigation measures in operation that you may want to consider implementing as the situation evolves.

Professional services in your pharmacy

When you open your pharmacy to customers, you may wish to return to offering additional professional services that were the previous 'norm' in your pharmacy. In the 'new norm', you and your team need to have a plan when providing these services that minimises the risk to you or your team. We spoke to Jonathan Morrissey in

Marrons Pharmacy, Clane, who have kept their pharmacy open to customers but maintained social distancing. We asked Jonathan how they managed to provide their additional services or private consultations to patients at this time. He said that when having to attend more personally to a customer, that they wore a mask, visor, gloves, and disposable apron. They sanitised their skin before and after donning gloves, and they sanitised the gloves before and after handling or dealing with the customer. They asked all customers to use sanitiser provided at the counter at the start of the interaction, and they covered their credit card machines with a cling film like material which was sanitisable. He also stated that the staff sanitised before dealing with any customer and sanitised as soon as they finished.

Instead of focusing on which services you cannot offer, start instead with the principle that you will provide all services. Conduct your risk assessment and then look at all the mitigation measures that you can put in place to reduce risk. To help engage staff, assess the risk score before and after mitigation. With the right plan you will be able to provide most services safely, but you may need more time for cleaning, hand washing and additional mitigation steps.

Pharmacy layout

A crucial part of your plan will be to look at your floor layout and how you can open the business whilst still maintaining physical distancing. As restrictions are slowly released, you will need to ensure you maintain social distancing. It may be that you need to look at a one-way system in the pharmacy. This can be achieved several ways. One is moving gondolas into a long wall type effect directing customers with signage to go in the direction you want them to go in. There is also the use of barriers or crowd control measures that would work here. There are number of providers who can assist with crowd control barriers, such as retractable belt systems, but this can also be achieved by moving gondolas. We have several providers of these products listed on the IPU website who can assist you with this.

Social distance signage

To maximise the impact of any new system, you will need to look at highlighting this with social distancing floor and hanging signage in the pharmacy. Consumers are accustomed to queuing and maintaining social distance at present as these measures are in place in all retail outlets, but once restrictions are gradually released consumers may in the joy of being able to shop again, revert to previous actions or systems. When this

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happens staff must correct customers very quickly. This will ensure that customers know what is expected from them once they enter your pharmacy for the safety of you and your team.

It is advisable to check the signage weekly for any defects to ensure that the message is crystal clear to all who enter the pharmacy. Use of signage on the pharmacy window with regards to the one-way system should be used to communicate the message to your customers.

Staff engagement with customers

Whether you allow a small number of customers or open the pharmacy up fully, you will need to communicate this message clearly with your staff, so they are all comfortable and ready for a return to a new norm. With a small number of customers in the pharmacy at any one time, will they just be collecting medication, or will they browse while they wait? It may be difficult for them to shop your front of pharmacy whilst trying to maintain physical distancing from another customer, and this is where your staff will have to bring their customer service skills to the fore. It looks like make overs and testing of products will not happen any time soon, so you will need to think of other channels to excite and educate customers on your new product ranges. Staff reviews or tutorials posted on your social media feeds may be worth considering.

Visual displays

As you might only have a couple of customers at a time in the pharmacy you must merchandise offers in highly visible locations. This is historically on gondola ends, but if you choose to move gondolas to assist in the floor layout, it may now be at the bays nearest the counter or a specific hotspot in the pharmacy. Displays should be planned and merchandised correctly. Do not try to overload a display, as customers will

have a snapshot of the offers as they move around the one-way system. You will also need to factor in that this summer sales will not follow a traditional summer, with products required for foreign travel reduced and items for personal hygiene and hair management increasing. Hand sanitisers will start to sell again as people move around and as other businesses on the high street open back up. This may also provide a business-to-business opportunity in provision of sanitation products to your neighbouring businesses. If you are producing your own hand sanitiser, it would be a good idea to contact your local enterprises prior to them reopening to assess interest so that you can manufacture in time.

Point of sale

Highlight offers with signage! We have great value available so let us tell the customer. Whether you print them instore or get them from a local printer, try to introduce colour into any signage as it will better catch the customers attention. Be clear on the text you use, they should say 'Special Offer', 'WOW', 'Better Value'. Do not be afraid to use these taglines and come up with some others like 'We're Back!'.

Customer experience

If you do introduce a one-way system into the pharmacy, then, as we have said, staff engagement with the customer will become even more essential. You may now have counter screens in use and feel that you will continue with the screens going forward, however, the interaction between your staff and customers will need to be even more prevalent to ensure that the customer service and experience that your customers were used to pre COVID-19 is maintained, and in the new norm, increased. All staff should be using soft selling skills and asking, "is there anything else we can help you with?".

Customers may be happier to get some soap, toiletries, or feminine hygiene products while they are getting medications to reduce what they need to purchase in grocery stores.

Summary

This situation is so fluid now that trying to estimate when and how the release of lockdown procedures will happen is like looking into a crystal ball. As part of any plan you prepare, I would recommend that you communicate with all your staff on your plans for the business as the restrictions are eased. Get staff feedback on your risk assessment as they will be front and centre on any opening up of pharmacy floor space. Take all suggestions and try to develop into a workable plan.

We need to prepare for the easing of restrictions and the possible flood of shoppers who just want to get out of the house following their enforced quarantine. Your customers are going to continue to go to grocery stores to purchase items that you stock, so reminding your customers that you have been here through it all and are still here offering great service and value is a must.

If you are prepared and have a plan, you can provide a customer shopping experience in your pharmacy that is second to none. It is a win-win situation for all. We would urge you to adopt Darwinian principles at this time; it is not the strongest or the most intelligent that survives – it is the one that is most adaptable to change.

Keep safe and stay well, and if you need any assistance or further clarification on any of the areas raised in this article, please don't hesitate to contact darren.kelly@ipu.ie.

