



PGEU Statement

COMMUNITY PHARMACISTS' CONTRIBUTION TO COUNTERACTING OBESITY IN THE EU

Approved by the PGEU General Assembly on 10 March 2009

Community Pharmacists committed to fight overweight and obesity

The **Pharmaceutical Group of the European Union (PGEU)**¹ is well aware of the Public Health challenge posed by the rising rates of obesity in European citizens. As emphasised by the WHO European Charter on Counteracting Obesity, this challenge calls for the increasing access to and affordability of healthy choices to the population through a multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder collaboration.

Whilst we recognise and support that prevention is key to counteracting the obesity epidemic, particularly in children, adolescents and lower socioeconomic population groups, it is also important not to forget those who are at risk and those already overweight and obese. With the current statement, PGEU draws attention to activities community pharmacists can develop or have already in place to promote prevention measures and provide screening and treatment to overweight and obese people.

Furthermore, we take this opportunity to raise our concerns about the misuse and abuse by non-overweight people, particularly adolescents, of available weight-control and anti-obesity medicines, and call for a better use of the resources offered by community pharmacists to ensure the correct use of such medicines.

Finally we welcome the fact that the European Parliament's report on the European Commission's White Paper on a Strategy for Europe on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity related health issues recognises pharmacists as a health professional with an essential role in the early identification of patients at risk of overweight and cardiovascular disease and who should be a major actor in the fight against the obesity epidemic and non communicable diseases.

How can Community Pharmacists contribute?

Community pharmacists in Europe, through PGEU members, are committed to making a major contribution in improving public health by seeking to ensure that people derive maximum therapeutic benefit from prescribed medication dispensed in pharmacies; providing high quality advice to ensure safe and responsible self-care including, where appropriate, self-medication; encouraging healthy lifestyles through effective health promotion and health education strategies.

Community pharmacies are widely distributed in the heart of communities including deprived communities, and offer an informal environment where an objective advice from a knowledgeable health professional is available without the need to make an appointment.² Pharmacies are effective community centres for health promotion and many have developed consultation areas where counselling can be provided respecting the patient's privacy.

Because community pharmacies are widely accessible, from urban to rural areas, in prosperous or poor regions, pharmacists can more easily be reached by the population than any other healthcare professional.

¹ PGEU represents around 400,000 community pharmacists from 30 European Countries, including EU Members States, EU candidate countries and EFTA members. The members of PGEU are national associations and professional bodies of community pharmacists. PGEU's objective is to promote the role of the pharmacists as key actors in public health. Furthermore, PGEU aims to ensure that the views of the pharmacy profession are taken into account in the EU decision-making process. PGEU provides to its members an ideal platform to exchange information, and collect and disseminate best practices. Additionally, it also encourages its members to further develop new projects aiming at anticipating and responding to society's needs, in the broader context of Public Health.

² Several European wide and national surveys show that pharmacists are highly trusted for their professional services (i.e. Reader Digest "Most trusted Professional services, 2005"). Moreover, the Council of Europe Resolution ResAP(2001)2 concerning the pharmacist's role in the framework of health security recognizes that pharmacists provide added value to the healthcare system both through their scientific and pharmaceutical expertise and in term of ethics.

Promote healthy lifestyles

Considering their role within the communities they serve, Community Pharmacists are also an important resource at the disposal of those communities for promoting and improving health promotion and education. Contrary to what happens with other healthcare settings, pharmacies are visited both by people enjoying of good health and people suffering from ill-health. And it is also well known that mothers with children are high users of community pharmacies. This creates many opportunities for community pharmacists to communicate preventive measures to healthy citizens, including the provision of information to parents and caregivers about how to improve their children's health, hygiene and nutrition.

Besides the provision of information and promotion of health campaigns at pharmacy level, health promotion in schools and other community organisations can be another effective way of improving overall health education for children, adolescents and other population groups. In some of the member states, pharmacists, with support from their professional organisations, visit schools and community support groups to convey health messages. They reinforce healthy eating and adequate physical exercise, aspects also relevant to mental health and wellbeing.

Identify patients at risk of overweight

The Body Mass Index (BMI), calculated as body weight (in kg) divided by squared body height (in meters), and the Waist Circumference (WC), a measure of abdominal or central adiposity, are common methods of evaluating individual people to see if they are over or under weight and to identify increased risk to develop overweight and obesity-related health problems. Both can be easily done in community pharmacies. It is worth noting that it is becoming more common to see private areas or consultation rooms in pharmacies, hence such measurements can be done in respect of patient's privacy.

Reduce obesity-related health risks

Evidence shows that obesity is an important risk factor for a number of chronic diseases such as heart disease, hypertension, stroke, some cancers and type 2 diabetes³; obese people are more likely to suffer from a number of psychological problems such as low self image, social stigma, reduced mobility and a poorer quality of life⁴; and obesity in middle age increases the risk of future dementia independently of comorbid conditions⁵.

There is therefore value in combining obesity prevention with chronic disease prevention programs to avoid duplication of resources.⁶ In fact, already in some countries pharmacies provide services in relation to conditions which are correlated with weight problems e.g. diabetes, hypertension, smoking cessation, etc.

Manage excess weight and obesity

A common pharmacy-based pharmacist-led service for patients, working with dieticians and other members of the multidisciplinary team, provides health promotion advice including diet, exercise, alcohol consumption; motivational support to lose weight; calculation of the BMI, and monitoring this over a pre-defined period of time (normally six months); waist measurement and blood pressure monitoring and referral to an appropriate healthcare professional. The service also promotes the evidence-based treatment of obesity and alerts to the potential health hazards of unproven treatment approaches.

³ <http://www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/publications/facts/obesity/en/>

⁴ Department of Health. www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyandGuidance/HealthandSocialCareTopics/Obesity/fs/en.

⁵ Whitmer R. et al, Obesity in middle age and future risk of dementia: a 27 year longitudinal population based study. BMJ, doi:10.1136/bmj.38446.466238.E0 (published 16 May 2005)

⁶ http://health-evidence.ca/documents/16889/Flvnn_2006_Summary_Statement_-_English.pdf

The implementation of such a pharmacy obesity service is complemented with additional training of the pharmacy staff. Audit tools can also be developed to ensure the high quality of the service provided.

This type of service is often started by the private initiative of community pharmacists and/or their national professional organisations, but they could be widely implemented if such services would be recognised and appropriately integrated in overall national strategies to counteract obesity. The potential to expand access of such services to a wider range of the population, including lower socioeconomic population groups, is enormous and the associated cost savings for health systems would be significant.^{7,8}

Counselling and signposting

It is also worth noting that pharmacists can identify situations where weight gaining is a side effect of certain therapies and discuss with the patient and his/her doctor possible alternatives. Furthermore, pharmacists can identify situations where the use of weight-control medicines or supplements is counter-indicated, unnecessary or ineffective and advise individuals of the consequences of using such products and, if appropriate, refer to other health professionals.

Conclusion

PGEU is committed to continuously promoting the pharmacists' contribution to public health in this essential area. In particular, PGEU is committed to

- ensuring that pharmacists are fully engaged in preventive action;
- promoting the best professional practice in managing excess weight and obesity;
- promoting the rational and safe use of weight-control and anti-obesity medicines;
- engaging in multi-stakeholder debates at European and national levels;
- sharing examples of good practice;
- collaborating with the Commission and Member States' in the set up of systems to ensure access to and quality delivery of service for the prevention, screening and managing of overweight, obesity and associated chronic diseases.

PGEU believes that community pharmacists, through the broad network of pharmacies throughout all EU Member States, are a useful and highly accessible resource that should be used to its full potential in the development and implementation of governmental policies and strategies to counteract overweight and obesity.

PGEU considers that community pharmacists have an important role to play in improving the health capital of the population by preventing illness and disease, promote health information and education, and reducing drug-related damage. The expertise of pharmacists and the existing network of pharmacies throughout national territories are ready available and should be fully utilised.

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⁷ Counterweight Project Team. Influence of body mass index on prescribing costs and potential cost savings of a weight management programme in primary care. J Health Serv Res Policy. 2008 Jul;13(3):158-66.

⁸ Cornier, Marc-Andre, Charles W. Tate, Gary K. Grunwald, and Daniel H. Bessesen. Relationship between waist circumference, body mass index, and medical care costs. Obes Res. 2002;10: 1167-1172.