

Position Paper on Pact for Skills

Pharmaceutical Group of the European Union





About Us

The Pharmaceutical Group of the European Union (PGEU) is the association representing community pharmacists in 32 European countries. In Europe over 400.000 community pharmacists provide services throughout a network of more than 160.000 pharmacies, to an estimated 46 million European citizens daily.

Table of Contents

4

Introduction

6

**Pharmacists education
and training**

8

**Skills to accompany the green and digital
transitions**

10

**Transversal skills for advancing
patient-centred care**

11

Conclusion

12

References

Introduction

PGEU welcomes the Pact for skills¹ and the European Skills Agenda² as key tools to strengthen European health care systems also based on the main lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The ongoing transformation of healthcare systems across Europe requires an ambitious up- and reskilling of its healthcare workforce. Pharmacists represent the third largest health professional group globally after nurses and physicians. Moreover, they are the most accessible healthcare professional to the public. As a key element of primary healthcare, they play an essential role in disease prevention, health promotion and contributing to the safe, effective and rational use of medicines close to where people live or work. They also are a vital part of healthcare systems' response capacity to emergencies as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic³.

Furthermore, key trends as the overall ageing of European population, rising polypharmacy, innovations in (chronic) disease management and the advancement of digital technology and personalized medicine require pharmacists to continuously develop their skill set at a rapid pace.

As health services delivery is undergoing significant transformation from disease-centred toward integrated, participatory and people-centred care, focused on patient outcomes, health professionals may need some changes in the skill set employed in day-to-day practice.

Moreover, the main lesson learned from the COVID-19 pandemic for the health care sector is that we must change the way health care is provided and move from a hospital-centred care to a patient-centred care model, treating patients as close to their home as possible. The Expert Panel on effective ways of investing in Health (EXPH), set up by the European Commission, concludes in its Opinion on Task shifting and health system design that task sharing, where it is based on robust evidence and implemented effectively, can make a major contribution to health outcomes and to the sustainability of health systems⁴. It also concludes that groups other than physicians, and especially pharmacists, can undertake substantially expanded roles compared to what has

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traditionally been the case, requiring adequate training and support within integrated teams and open approaches to information-sharing.

As recommended by the OECD⁵, many European countries have already introduced changes in legislation to expand the role of pharmacists to help maintaining continuity of care and relieve pressure on the rest of the healthcare system. Some countries have also secured additional funds to empower pharmacists in their vital work on the frontline against COVID-19.

Community pharmacists across Europe are also strongly committed to help reducing the impact pharmaceuticals can have on the environment and preventing unnecessary waste. As medicines experts they are well placed to increase public awareness, promote the prudent use and correct disposal of pharmaceuticals, and provide advice on the availability of 'greener' pharmaceuticals where such information is available. Moreover, it is also vital that the network of 400.000+ community pharmacies in Europe are guided and supported to help contributing to a healthier planet as much as possible.



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Pharmacists education and training

In Europe, pharmacists must complete a minimum of five years of education and training to become a pharmacist.

Pharmacists are exposed to a unique mix of disciplines during their education and training including scientific, regulatory and clinical elements. In addition to undergraduate education and training focusing on the development and use of medicines, community pharmacists are also committed life-long learners across Europe.

Community pharmacists participate in continuous professional development activities (CPD) and continuous education (CE) relevant to their role in order to keep their knowledge up-to-date to respond to patients' and healthcare systems' needs⁶.

Pharmacists in the EU are one of the [six] professions granted automatic recognition of qualifications under the Directive on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications [Directive 2005/36/EC updated by Directive 2013/55/EU]. PGEU welcomed the last revision of the Directive on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications [Directive 2013/55/EU]. PGEU is particularly pleased with the revision of the article regulating pharmacists' activities [Art. 45§ 2]. The current provision properly reflects harmonised pharmacy practices in the Union. However, PGEU welcomes a revision of the Annex 5.6.1 describing the list of subjects for the training of pharmacists and Article 44. 3 describing the knowledge and skills that need to be acquired during the training of pharmacists. These provisions have not been changed since 1985 and they are not reflecting current scientific progress and innovation of pharmacy practice.

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No other health professionals have so much of their education devoted to medicinal products. Citizens of all EU Member States can therefore be confident that before a pharmacist is permitted to practice in their country, the necessary studies have been successfully completed and their community pharmacist is a true expert on medicines.

Pharmacists also frequently perform dual roles as care providers as well as mentors. As so, it is very important that those professionals can develop skills related to provide guidance/training, in order to effectively transfer their knowledge and experience to others.



For the benefit of the public, all pharmacists practice within strict Codes of Ethics and Professional Standards, including Good Pharmacy Practice, and have a personal commitment to maintaining professional competence throughout their working lives, through continuing professional development and license renewal where applicable. EU citizens can be confident that professional regulatory and quality assurance controls in all Member States are designed to ensure their protection, and ensure that all pharmacists authorised to practice maintain the required high quality in the professional services they provide. However, in order to comply with the highest standards of patient care in the coming decades, they will need to continue developing their skill set in line with the needs of patients and healthcare systems.

Skills to accompany the green and digital transitions

In light of the above, PGEU therefore supports EU coordinated strategies that aim to enhance the development of digital skills needed to successfully deploy new digital technologies, such as artificial intelligence, that aim to improve the quality of care and increase efficiency in Member States' health systems. This includes adequate skills on the governance and use of real world data in context, big data management, health informatics, digital literacy and technologies.

In the area of eHealth, no other healthcare profession has invested more than community pharmacy in terms of its own funds. It has developed the necessary infrastructure and culture to implement innovative eHealth technologies with the ultimate goal to deliver significant and accessible benefits to the public. In Europe, 100% of community pharmacies are computerised and connected to the internet and the profession has significantly invested in modern information communication technologies (ICT), including pharmacy dispensing software and the roll out of e-Prescriptions.

In addition, pharmacies also increasingly integrate automated technologies within their practice, which generate significant benefits in terms of safe dispensing and saved working time on dispensing which pharmacists can spend on providing patients with professional advice and services. Examples include pharmacy dispensing software, automated pack dispensing robots, central filling systems and automated daily dosing systems.

As highlighted in the PGEU Vision for Community Pharmacy in Europe in 2030⁷, community pharmacists commit to integrate innovative, beneficial ICT and digital health solutions in practice, to complement the existing - and often generations-long - face-to-face patient-pharmacist relationships.

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Community pharmacists specifically acknowledge the benefits that Big Data and AI can bring for European health systems and consider these technologies as a useful tool to support healthcare professionals. In routine practice at national level, these tools shall be always accompanied by pharmacists' expert and professional advice, in order to improve workflow efficiency, while promoting therapy effectiveness and offering the highest standard of pharmacy services to their patients.

In this respect, community pharmacists are committed to use their unique position at the heart of European communities and leverage the potential of Big Data and AI to provide more personalised advice to patients and robust, evidence-based information on issues related to their therapies while promoting safe and rational medicines use. Community pharmacists have the infrastructure, culture and expertise to make use of the potential of Big Data and AI in healthcare and to provide trusted sources of reliable and independent health information to patients by making the innovative digital solutions integral to community pharmacy practice.

Moreover, in line with the ambitions of the EU Green Deal and as part of their role in improving public health, pharmacists see it as their duty to advise citizens on environmental health and safety. This includes advising on appropriate handling, adherence and disposal as well providing information to the public on the availability of 'greener' pharmaceuticals where such information is available. Indeed, the majority of the European population can return expired or unused medicines to their community pharmacy. Therefore, pharmacists are also committed to further develop knowledge and skills to address challenges related to the **environmental and sustainability aspects** of pharmacy practice as part of a One Health approach⁸.



Transversal skills for advancing patient-centred care

In many European countries, community pharmacists are developing more patient-centred roles and the number of primary care services available via community pharmacies is rapidly expanding. In addition, the increasing overlap of professional roles, along with modern health systems that require health professionals to work as a team, mean that healthcare professionals will also need to manage the health of patients smarter, using an integrated and multidisciplinary approach.

Community pharmacists therefore welcome further development of transversal skills, including interpersonal skills like interprofessional teamwork, socio-cultural sensitivity or problem solving, that aim to improve their capacity for successful disease prevention, patient-centred communication, interprofessional collaboration and health promotion.

The European Pharmaceutical Students' Association (EPSA), representing over 100,000 pharmacy students across 37 European countries, also outlines why transversal/soft skills are needed for the provision of adequate patient-centred care and calls for their inclusion in pharmacy curricula⁹.

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Conclusion



European community pharmacists support the ongoing efforts of the European Commission to coordinate strategies and foster the investment in skills for healthcare professionals to ensure they can thrive in the green and digital transitions, and to help in the recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.



The COVID-19 pandemic is accelerating the transformation of healthcare systems towards more accessible and patient-centred care models, increasingly supported by digital technologies. Community pharmacists are ready to embrace this transformation and enhance their dynamic and sustainable contribution to the health of the individuals and communities they serve whilst helping to strengthen Europe's health systems.



Pharmacists are committed to the up- and reskilling of their profession to answer to today's and tomorrow's needs of patients and health systems. For this, PGEU identifies the need to specifically enhance training in relation to **digital skills** needed to successfully deploy new digital technologies, such as big data/artificial intelligence, and **transversal skills, including interpersonal skills**, which aim to improve their capacity for successful patient-centred communication, disease prevention and management, health promotion and interprofessional collaboration.



Moreover, in line with the ambitions of the EU Green Deal and as part of their role in improving public health, pharmacists are ready to further invest in the development of skills to address challenges related to the **environmental and sustainability aspects** of pharmacy practice as part of a One Health approach.

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