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## PSNC Pharmacy Advice Audit 2021: A summary of findings

This briefing summarises the findings of a Pharmacy Advice Audit run by PSNC between 25th January and 12th February 2021. 5,830 community pharmacies in England took part in the audit and the findings clearly demonstrate the continuing reliance of patients and the public on the walk-in healthcare advice that is available from pharmacies.

### Introduction

Community pharmacies, as the most accessible healthcare locations in England, have a natural role as the first port of call for patients or members of the public with minor health concerns. This role was further cemented in 2019 with the introduction of the Community Pharmacist Consultation Service (CPCS): this service sees GPs, NHS online and NHS111 referring patients with certain symptoms or health needs to pharmacies for a consultation. Pharmacies receive a fee for offering this service for the NHS.

But many pharmacies also offer healthcare advice to patients who do not have a referral from one of these routes and who are either walking into their pharmacy as a first option, have not been able to access another part of the health system, or have been informally referred. These patients may receive a similar consultation with a pharmacist, but the pharmacy receives no specific funding for offering this. These informal consultations do not need to be recorded by the pharmacy, so are difficult to track.

PSNC carried out a [first audit in summer 2020](#) to assess the reliance of patients on these informal pharmacy consultations. A follow-up audit was carried out in 2021 and this briefing sets out some of its key results.

**Please note:** Due to the addition of extra information in the 2021 audit overview module, our calculations have been done differently in 2021 to 2020 and so the 2020 results may have been an underestimate: while this means the 2021 results are not directly comparable with the summer audit; we do think they indicate an increasing reliance on pharmacies through the pandemic.

### Audit Methodology

Between the end of January and the beginning of February 2021, 5,830 community pharmacies took part in the audit to try to quantify the number of informal patient consultations happening in their pharmacy.

The pharmacy teams recorded all the consultations that happened over a single day, as well as asking patients some questions and noting why the patient had come to the pharmacy; what the consultation was for (e.g. responding to symptoms or asking a question about an existing health condition); the time spent on the consultation; the outcome for the patient; and where the patient would have gone if pharmacy advice had not been available. The audit also asked pharmacies about COVID-19 pressures.

### Key Results from the Audit

In total, 114,898 patient consultations were recorded by the 5,830 community pharmacies, indicating that the average pharmacy carries out around 17 consultations per day or more than 100 per week; this excludes advice given following the dispensing of a prescription or via formal referrals from the NHS CPCS. This means that more than **1.1 million informal consultations** are taking place in community pharmacies in England

every week, totalling more than **58 million consultations per year**. The average staff time per consultation was just over five minutes, and this sometimes included both non-pharmacists and pharmacists.

During the audit, 8.6% of people seeking advice from a pharmacy said they had been unable to access another part of the healthcare system: that is 96,000 people per week, or **five million per year**. A further 9% and 2.4% of consultations were the product of informal referrals from General Practice and NHS 111.

During the audit, 97% of consultations resulted in advice being given by the pharmacy team. The pharmacy provided advice alongside the sale of a medicine in 54% of consultations and advice alone in 43% of consultations. The audit indicates that every week pharmacies provide advice to over 730,000 people seeking advice for symptoms – nearly **38 million people per year**. In addition to this, every week pharmacies provide advice to over 263,000 people seeking advice about an existing medical condition – **13.6 million people per year**.

Almost a quarter (24%) of the pharmacy consultations also included advice and support related to COVID-19 and these consultations took on average **20% longer than a non-COVID-19 consultation**. That means 270,000 patients every week are seeking pharmacy advice on COVID-19 – that is **14 million per year**.

Almost half of patients reported that if attending their local pharmacy had not been a viable option, they would have visited their GP. This means that pharmacies giving advice saves more than 2 million GP appointments every month, or **24 million every year**: that equates to 74 appointments for every single GP practice every week across the country. An additional 70,000 people would go to A&E or an NHS walk-in centre every week if they could not get advice from their pharmacy, which equates to **3.3 million people per year**.

During this audit, 61% of pharmacies reported being under intense pressure – the average score out of 10 for pharmacy pressure reported was 7.66.

## Conclusions

This audit, along with the earlier one in 2020, has shown just how reliant patients in England are on the healthcare advice provided informally by community pharmacies. During COVID-19 pharmacies have maintained their open-door policy accepting face-to-face consultation for patients who need help and support. The audit findings indicate that despite being under intense pressure:

- NHS pharmacies carry out almost 17 consultations with patients every day.
- Almost half of these patients would otherwise have attended GP practices.
- In almost a quarter of consultations, patients sought advice about COVID-19.

Clearly the additional burden on General Practice and other healthcare settings were this pharmacy advice to be taken away would not be manageable. Also clear from the findings is the fact that pharmacies continue to handle a higher number of patients who have been informally referred by NHS111 and general practice, rather than using the formal CPCS referral route. This poses a risk of patients not being followed up, and means pharmacies miss out on funding that could be critical to the successful running of their business.

While a level of funding is provided for pharmacies for supporting people with 'self-care' through the community pharmacy contractual framework (CPCF), PSNC still believes that this is insufficient to cover this increasingly important part of community pharmacies work. We will continue to press HM Government and the NHS to recognise the incredible efforts of community pharmacies throughout the COVID-19 pandemic by providing a sustainable funding package for them.

For further information, please contact [PSNC's Communications Team](#).