

Welcome to the January 2022 CPWY Committee Blog!

Heroes and Villains

Here we go again, the third attempt at getting 2020 right. The COVID-19 virus and the resulting pandemic continues to dominate our lives, with the current Omicron wave making us replay the New Year of 2021 again; a wave of infections reaching a crescendo, growing numbers in hospitals, self-isolation numbers at record levels, with huge pressures on key workers. Once again pharmacy teams are in the frontline battle with both COVID-19 and the politicisation of a pandemic. Who would have thought that a public health measure such as wearing a mask was a political statement or asking a customer to wear a mask in the pharmacy was an infringement of their basic human rights?

Last week, I offered a free mask to a gentleman seeking advice for a minor ailment in the pharmacy, his response was that it was only mandatory for me to wear a mask and not for customers, when advised that it was a legal requirement for all in a health care setting, he responded with a tirade about his freedoms and walked out. Pharmacy has become the villain in simply trying to comply with the laws to keep our staff and other members of the public as safe as possible in our premises.

In one respect this wave has been very different to Delta, pharmacy teams have been enrolled as vaccine clinic sites and together they have done an amazing job, vaccinating millions as Omicron threatened to overwhelm the NHS. Leaders across the political spectrum and even some sceptical GPs have had to admit that community pharmacy teams have stepped up to replace the large vaccine clinics with 'a thousand small ships' vaccinating their local communities. Pharmacy teams have been the heroes, striding forward in a herculean effort to meet the challenges from Omicron (and NHS bureaucracy to get accredited) to build a defensive wall of vaccinations. All the while pharmacy teams have had to still contend with the 'normal' Christmas surge of prescriptions and loss of their own staff to Omicron. It is amazing that we kept going, never mind that we managed to vaccinate the nation.

Just when we thought we were tested to breaking point, the Lateral Flow Test (LFT) tsunami struck pharmacy as the government urged the nation to get tested, before every social gathering, rather than limit social gatherings as they have done in the other home nations of the UK. This resulted in unprecedented demand for LFTs, with the public demanding supplies because they had obtained a collection code online. Why should they know that there is no correlation between a collection code and physical stock? The LFT supply became extremely constrained with demand accelerating to all time highs. The result was pharmacy staff having to manage the ire of a disappointed public, who in some instances would become aggressive. Pharmacy was the villain once more.

Thankfully some key organisations such as the Association of Independent Multiple Pharmacies (AIMp) through their Chief Executive, Leyla Hanbeck had been raising this matter with the media, the NHS and government throughout December, culminating in this story making the national news on the BBC over a number of days. Just when pharmacy needed a hero, we found one who had been working tirelessly to promote and advocate for all pharmacies.

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This resulted in a renewed government commitment to increase supplies, and put the spotlight on the challenges within pharmacy. Thank you, Leyla and colleagues, for working on behalf of all pharmacies.

We cannot predict what will happen next with COVID-19, or for pharmacy, no doubt there will continue to be new waves of both the virus and of pharmacy being perceived as either the hero or the villain. What we do know is that community pharmacy teams will step up to all that is asked of them and more. Heroes one, heroes, all.

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