



Pharmacist on the Front Lines of a Pandemic - Q&A with Moatasem Samara

Moatasem Samara is an owner and a partner of a few pharmacies in Edmonton. His pharmacy background includes mental health and addictions. Moatasem loves being a pharmacist because he is able to impact people's lives through his knowledge and experience in problem solving and patient care.

Q: How did you find yourself needing to prepare for an unexpected pandemic?

A: As with many, the crisis hit us without us being prepared for it, with very little resources and almost no guidance or guidelines. I spent the first two weeks running around trying to gather sanitizers, cleaning supplies and personal protective equipment. At the same time, I was trying not to hoard products and to leave some for others.

Q: What kind of safety measures or PPE are you using to do your job? How are you staying safe?

A: We were lucky that one of our pharmacies is a compounding pharmacy and we're able to compound hand sanitizers, initially, for our group, then for our colleagues at other pharmacies and health professions, then we were able to sell to the public. We also installed vinyl separators to further protect staff and patients. We did most of the work ourselves. For the first time I can recall, I had to be a handyman. There was not only the concern for personal safety, there was also the concern that we could be infecting each other and some of us had family that would not survive an infection. This made us be more appreciative of the vulnerability of our patients, who by definition, mostly have medical conditions which made many of them vulnerable.

Q: What do you want people to know about your job?

I have to say, I am proud of how we pulled through this so far, pharmacists, government and population of the province. We have good people in this province and the pandemic gave us a chance to shine. If one is to look for a silver lining.

My main focus in my practice is addictions and mental health. This opened my eyes to a bigger picture than Covid-19 and it's containment. We had an opioid crisis before Covid-19, we probably have an opioid catastrophe at the moment, but no one is reporting it and it is not newsworthy in this climate. Most treatment facilities shut down especially in the initial phase of the crisis. I am fortunate to be working closely with one of the biggest rehab centers in the province. The decisions that had to be made were difficult and the amount of additional work and precautions was a steep mountain to climb.

For weeks, I found all that is going on to be surreal, "marked by the intense irrational reality of a dream." Now I feel expectations of going back to normal what is bizarre and unreal.

I hope everyone stays safe and that we can get through this together and a vaccine is found soon.