



Pharmacist on the Front Lines of a Pandemic - Q&A with Taria Gouw

I would love to share my pharmacy teams experience throughout the COVID-19 pandemic AND even have the time to respond - which has not been the case over much of the last 6 months.

I first off want to congratulate MY pharmacy team for the amazing job they have been doing and continue to do throughout the COVID pandemic - they have worked over and above the expectations laid out for them and have worked tirelessly to provide exceptional patient care in an extremely stressful time. Day to day pharmacy tasks during a non-pandemic state is demanding and exhausting, to begin with, BUT over the last 6 months, their perseverance and passion for taking care of the health needs of our community have been seriously challenged. Kudos to my team for rising to this challenge - I am so very appreciative and proud of them!!!

One of the biggest challenges throughout this pandemic has definitely been the extra cleaning/sanitation workload and procuring and wearing the PPE. The first few weeks were especially grueling as we did not have a great supply of PPE and the anxiety this caused the staff as well as our patients was very stressful. But as we were able to procure PPE from the government - thanks to RxA - and to a local Hutterite Colony that hand-made 100's of cotton face masks for us, we were golden in the supply department. When our staff members were getting sore ears from the face mask elastics, we had patients making "ear protectors" for us. Our community has been so supportive, and we are so thankful for this. Regarding the extra cleaning, we set timers for every hour of the workday to wipe down all counters, cupboards and workstations and everybody in the pharmacy and the entire store participated. Hand sanitizer and masks at the entrances to the store, directional arrows, and social distancing floor markers streamlined the safety for our patients. Our most exciting day at the pharmacy and for our front store clerks is when our plexiglass counter shields arrived - then we and our patients felt better protected. And as a staff, we don't know if we will ever get rid of the plexiglass counter shields as we have really noticed how "moistly" people really do communicate...

Another big challenge was the panic and anxiety surrounding the pandemic and the many, many questions and concerns our patients had. Our phones have never been busier as we fielded calls from concerned patients, especially when the 811 lines were jammed full. We did the best we could in providing up to date information as the situation changed daily. We were very thankful that RxA was able to get an assessment fee for 5 of these consults per day - we would have continued to provide this information regardless of getting paid because that's what we do as the most accessible healthcare professional BUT it is so refreshing to be acknowledged and remunerated as such in whatever manner that may entail. The phone conversations have actually helped us be able to expand our "virtual care" role and many a SMMA and CACP initial consults and /or follow-ups have been performed throughout the pandemic. We have reached patients that have not been interested in this service in the past, which has been very rewarding as well. And, of course, we have our awesome "in person" patients whom appreciate all the hard work we are doing for them and the community as a whole. That thankfulness is what gets us all up in the morning to face another day on the front lines!!!



And let us not forget about all the stock shortages - YIKES!!! The maximum 30 day dispense amount certainly helped, and it was awesome that the government rolled back the copay for the public drug plans to help mitigate the cost for these people. But the shortages still did not go away. Our cash paying and private plan patients were very unhappy with the 30-day supply and so for 3 months we have been explaining the situation to all our patients. Most were very understanding once they had the facts, but there are always those few that no matter what we said or did were still unhappy and sometimes a bit abusive to myself and the staff. The wait time for prescriptions for sure doubled through this whole time period as we were seeing patients three times as often and whether you give a 30 day or 90 day supply - the work load is the same...But again our staff has done a phenomenal job taking the high road whenever any of the patients gave us grief, which we all know is not an easy thing to do. Over the last few weeks with the government encouraging a 90 day dispense quantity our workload has doubled again as we have all our 30-day patients going back to a 90 day dispense with lots of drug shortages again. We have tried to increase stock, knowing the demand would hit us hard, but we still have anywhere from 50-60 patients daily that we are "owing" medications to as everyone scrambles to acquire increased stock again. Everyday, we have the mantra - tomorrow will be better - and I'm sure in a few months workload will be back to some semblance of "normal".

So, I guess to summarize, the COVID Pandemic hit our pharmacy fast and fierce, just like anywhere. We had only 3 confirmed COVID-19 cases in our southeast Alberta county, which was a huge blessing, but the stress of our world changing overnight was still daunting. The staff and I are EXHAUSTED to say the least BUT we still perform our patient care duties to the best of our ability, all the while trying to keep a smile on our faces. Emotions have run high, our abilities have been tested, and I believe we are stronger for it. We have learned a lot throughout this pandemic that have helped us become better health professionals and compassionate human beings, and for that I am thankful!!!