



# Community Pharmacists in the COVID-19 Pandemic

July 2020

## Community Pharmacists at your Service

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The COVID-19 pandemic introduced many challenges and paradigm shifts in the community pharmacies around Singapore. Many customers and patients were frantic, panicky and helpless. Community pharmacists, being the most accessible source of professional help in the community, carried the responsibility to help these people with their questions, clarify their doubts and provide relevant advice to support and calm the public.

Find out how our community pharmacists tackled these challenges during COVID-19 using their medical expertise, as well as new technologies to provide professional help in the community, ensuring safe and effective healthcare for everyone.

## Do it the Right Way!

### Masks

Community pharmacists faced large crowds in the pharmacies during the COVID-19 period with customers coming in to look for masks, sanitisers, thermometers and more. Winding long queues were seen outside the community pharmacies every day. Daily consults with patients have diverted from the usual and pharmacists now have to allay concerns on how customers can better protect themselves from the virus and clarify rumours heard from various media outlets.



Singaporeans scrambling to find masks, sanitisers and disinfectants in the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic while social media platforms fan the fear of shortage

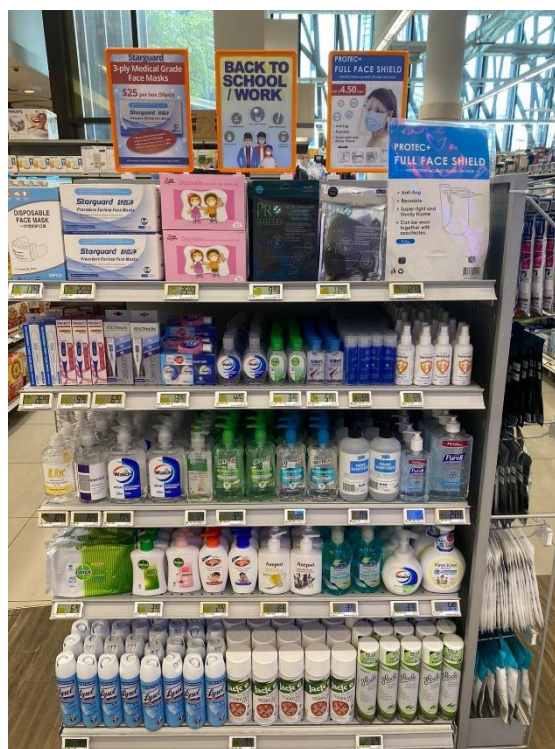
With the evolving situation, community pharmacists prepared ourselves by ensuring that we are constantly updated on the rapidly changing guidelines from the World Health Organisation (WHO) and Ministry of Health (MOH) to be able to counsel patients on topics such as the proper use of masks, what are the differences among the various types of masks such as N95 masks, surgical masks, fabric masks and what particles each type of mask protects against.

## Sanitisers and Disinfectants

The COVID-19 pandemic has also brought along keen interest on the myriad arrays of disinfectants, such as hydrogen peroxide, povidone-iodine, isopropyl alcohol and more.

At times, it can be challenging to explain about the efficacy of the various formulations and assist the public with the best recommendations based on availability, safety for special groups of people (e.g. pregnant mothers, young children) and evaluation of the areas they would like to disinfect. Proper hand washing techniques were also heavily emphasised in our conversations with customers. Many people had the misconception that hand sanitisers were more effective than proper hand washing. We had to clarify that proper hand washing with soap and water is more effective in getting rid of germs. Hand sanitisers should only be used when soap and water are not available.

Furthermore, when supply of masks and sanitisers fell short and people started to panic, community pharmacists had to calm them down and advise them to be considerate and not hoard.



Different types of masks, sanitisers and disinfectants



Long queues for masks and hand sanitisers



Masks and sanitisers out of stock at many pharmacies

## Supplements

Unsurprisingly, community pharmacists also received a huge number of queries about the effectiveness of immune-boosting supplements against the COVID-19 virus during this period. Taking a sound, evidence-based approach in counselling about supplements is never easy, especially when robust data is not always available. With the support from our clinical teams who promptly put together a list of immune boosting supplements and their supporting evidence, our pharmacists were able to make catered, responsible recommendations to our customers and patients appropriately.

## Thermometers

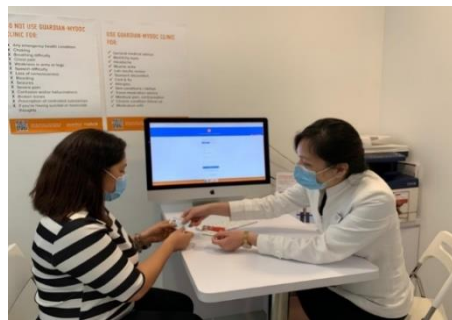
When daily temperature-taking became mandatory, community pharmacists had the opportunity to guide the public on the proper usage of thermometers. This included guidance on the temperature cut-offs to determine fever and on the various advantages and disadvantages of the different kinds of thermometers such as contactless forehead, ear and oral/rectal thermometers.

## Going Online – the new normal

When COVID-19 developed into a pandemic, community pharmacists stood with the frontline healthcare professionals and continued to serve the community. As polyclinics and hospitals rescheduled non-urgent clinic appointments, medication supply avenues for patients were disrupted.

Since April 2020, some community pharmacies have worked with tele-health providers such as MyDoc and iDOC to roll out both virtual clinics and in-store clinics. With the in-store clinic service, patients were able to consult the doctor through tele-conferencing.

After the in-store clinic consultation, patients can then fill their prescription on the spot at their convenience. In addition, patients can also consult a doctor through their mobile devices from the comfort of their homes. This option comes with the flexibility to collect medications from any of the selected community pharmacies.



Pharmacist assisting patient in tele-consultation with a doctor

### Tele-consultation in action

Sally was serving her Stay-Home-Notice (SHN) and she had a shortage of her long-term medications. Her cousin frantically approached a community pharmacist for help. The pharmacist calmed her down and introduced the tele-consultation service. She was delighted by the convenience of this medical service. The simplicity of the app allowed Sally to promptly extend her medications through a tele-consultation and her cousin was able to collect the medications from her nearest community pharmacy within a day.



## Collaboration with Polyclinics

A new service in collaboration with selected polyclinics was also launched to enhance the access of medications to patients. With this new service, patients may choose to collect medications in selected community pharmacies after e-consultations with doctors at the polyclinics. Upon request, the polyclinic will arrange a collection date range and deliver the patient's medication to the community pharmacy, where collection can be made within the next three days.

This gives patients the added convenience and increased accessibility to collect medications at a shopping mall and an added flexibility to collect them during the longer retailing hours. In addition, this service provides opportunities for face-to-face medication counselling and support, as opposed to home or locker deliveries.



A patient collecting her long-term medications at a community pharmacy

# SOS – Find my Medication

As COVID-19 made its way through Southeast Asia, multiple countries closed its borders to travel. In that climate of uncertainty and fear, community pharmacists experienced a surge of requests for prescription medications from tourists and foreign workers stranded in Singapore.

Some were tourists whose flight out had been cancelled, while some were family members of those working here whose short weekend visit turned into a long exile. Majority were the work permit holders, many of whom used to commute daily from Johor Bahru but are now forced to find temporary residence in Singapore. This group of people usually consult their doctors back in their home country for chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension and hyperlipidemia. However, they are now unable to do so.



The New Paper headlines depicting the dilemma many stranded foreigners were in

As their chronic medications ran out, they were at a loss as to how to navigate the Singapore healthcare system to obtain a re-supply. Many patients were not aware which of their chronic medications required a prescription or how to consult a doctor in Singapore as a foreigner. Some patients were also experiencing financial difficulty as a result of having exhausted their funds to find accommodation. Also, some medications used in foreign countries may not be available in Singapore and so community pharmacists had to suggest alternatives for the patients by making interventions.

## Examples of common substitutions

Nifedipine 20mg and gliclazide 80mg are commonly used in Malaysia but they are not readily available in Singapore



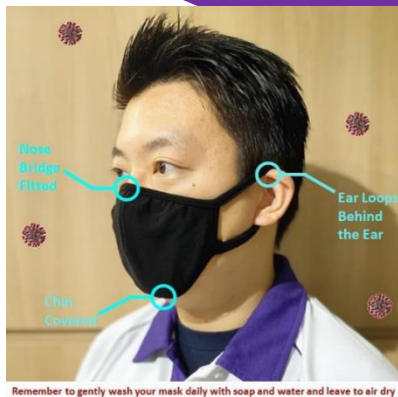
Foreign workers queuing to see the Healthserve doctor

To aid these patients, community pharmacists looked through their medication list to determine if these medications can be obtained in Singapore or if an appropriate substitution must be made. Some pharmacists consulted with their patients' doctors overseas to determine which locally available drug should be dispensed as a replacement. Next, the pharmacist assisted the patients in liaising with a Singaporean doctor, either through tele-consultation or through a physical general practitioner. In some cases, if the patients found themselves unable to afford the usual fees to consult a doctor, our pharmacists would direct them to non-profit agencies such as Healthserve for subsidised medical care. Finally, pharmacists liaised with each other and their colleagues in the public health institutions to help these patients find an affordable source of medication.

Overseas, several patients residing abroad in Indonesia and Malaysia also found themselves in a similar pinch. These patients had been obtaining medications from Singapore through the export law as they are unable to find their medications in their home country. With the travel restrictions in place, they were no longer able to travel to Singapore to pick up their regular supply. Thankfully through programmes such as G-MEDS, community pharmacists can help arrange medication delivery to their home country. Patients must first consult online with a Singapore doctor and obtain a valid Singapore prescription. Once the doctor has determined that they should continue with their current medication regimen, the G-MEDS app helps to facilitate the packing and delivery of these medications to their home country.

With ingenuity, patience and good language skills, community pharmacists play an important role in helping both Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans to stay healthy in these stressful times.

In our continuing efforts to expand our engagements beyond the pharmacy stores to the community, our community pharmacists have developed public education posters and messages on COVID-19 related topics such as hygiene tips, advice on immunity boosters and effective use of related items such as masks and hand sanitisers. These have been posted on social media and also aired on radio stations.



Wearing of masks has become a new normal during this pandemic. For many, it can be the first time they are wearing it. Community pharmacists came up with information to educate the public on the correct way of wearing a mask, as well as the efficacy among different types of masks. Information on other personal protective equipment such as gloves were also developed to correct any misconceptions.



# Hear from Us!



Community pharmacists also took the opportunity to reach out to smokers during this pandemic to encourage them to quit smoking. The “Quit Smoking, Start Living” poster was launched on World No Tobacco Day on social media to educate public on health risks involved while smoking during COVID-19 and also to encourage smokers to quit smoking. Smokers can sign up for the Start to S.T.O.P. programme for a community pharmacist to guide them and walk them through their smoking cessation journey.

Apart from social media, community pharmacists also shared, through TV interviews, on the various ways that the public can protect themselves during this pandemic. Common questions that the public asked were answered, such as the choice of disinfectants to use and how to wear a mask. The effectiveness of hand sanitisers and anti-bacterial wet wipes as compared to hand-washing with soap and water were also discussed.

In March, a roadshow was held at Our Tampines Hub to reach out to the public and increase awareness about COVID-19. Informative posters and leaflets were put together to educate the public on good personal hygiene and the various types of disinfectants for different purposes. Leaflets were given to the public in both English and Mandarin.



DPM Heng Swee Kiat visiting the PSS booth at the roadshow



## In Conclusion

COVID-19 is an unprecedented global crisis which has created many new normal within healthcare. With this, also comes greater public interest and awareness of health issues. Community pharmacists, as the most accessible source of professional help in the community, will continue to engage the public and provide more avenues for them to get the medication support and advice that they need.

A big thank you to everyone who contributed to this publication!  
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