Sustainable Solutions Report:
A Focus on Immunization
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Immunization has been the driving force behind the near-eradication of some major infectious diseases and is arguably the single most important advancement in public health over the last century. According to the World Health Organization, immunization saves between two and three million lives globally each year. Here in the developed world, immunization has been so successful that diseases such as polio, diphtheria, mumps and measles are rarely ever seen. Not only do vaccines save countless lives, they also save the Canadian health care system money by reducing the number of people requiring acute care.

Despite the life-saving potential of many vaccines, factors like inconvenience and misinformation often deter people from getting vaccinated. Given the importance of vaccines to public health, how can we increase immunization rates in Canada?

The answer is simple: expand the role of pharmacists in all provinces and territories across the country to enable them to administer common immunizations, including vaccines for the flu and other preventable illnesses. According to a report released by the broader pharmacy community in April 2013, called 9,000 Points of Care: Improving Access to Affordable Healthcare, taking this action would increase the flu immunization rates alone by an estimated 1% to 3% in Canada. This would reduce the burden of illness on our health care system and help make Canadians healthier. And as this expanded role unfolds, it would also be helpful to have better e-communications tools in place for physicians, pharmacists, and public health workers to keep each other updated on patients’ immunization status.

Pharmacists are uniquely suited to not only administer vaccinations, but also provide helpful tips and information. When individuals are picking up prescriptions, it provides the perfect time to remind them about flu shots and other important immunizations, answer any questions they may have, and clear up any potential misinformation.

Pharmacists in many provinces are already administering vaccinations with great success. Just last year, pharmacists in Ontario were permitted to administer the flu vaccine and 240,000 people were vaccinated by pharmacists. And in preparation for the current flu season, 436,000 people in Ontario had already been vaccinated at a pharmacy as of November 22, 2013. The 2013–2014 flu season also marks the first time pharmacists in Nova Scotia have the authority to vaccinate for flu.

Pharmacists in British Columbia, Alberta, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia have even more authority. In addition to seasonal influenza, they have the ability to administer injections to prevent illnesses such as hepatitis A or B, varicella, herpes zoster, human papillomavirus (HPV), tetanus, pneumococcal, and diphtheria. The Quebec government has acknowledged that pharmacies can serve as a health care hub and provide more convenient access to injection services. Currently immunizations are being administered by nurses in pharmacies, but expanding the vaccination role to pharmacists would further improve access in Quebec.

Canadians in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Quebec, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nunavut, Yukon and Northwest Territories deserve this same access to preventative care.
It is important pharmacists across the country have the ability to administer a wide range of immunizations, as they do in British Columbia, Alberta, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia.

However, this report places a special focus on flu immunization as it is where pharmacists stand to make the most immediate and far-reaching impact.

Some benefits include:

1. **Accessibility for patients.**
   Canadians can avoid the wait times that often come with getting immunizations at a doctor’s office. Many community pharmacies offer flu shots on a walk-in basis or by appointment and have extended hours including evenings and weekends.

2. **Cost savings to the health care system.**
   Allowing pharmacists to vaccinate, in addition to physicians and public health, will increase system capacity and in turn increase immunization rates. This will reduce the number of flu cases, and the number of people hospitalized as a result of the flu. For example, the Pharmacists’ Association of Newfoundland and Labrador estimates allowing pharmacists to vaccinate will save about $1.1 million in provincial health care costs in that province alone.iii In Ontario, the Universal Influenza Immunization Program (UIIP) significantly increased the number of people vaccinated resulting in a 52% reduction in health care services costs; these savings were mostly attributed to hospitalizations avoided.xi

3. **Reducing physician workload and wait times.**
   The average family physician wait time is 1.35 days for urgent care and it can be over 3 weeks for non-urgent care.iv Pharmacists can play a key role in relieving pressure on family physicians, helping to free up their time to deal with more complex care and the patients that need them most.

4. **Economic Improvement.**
   There is a benefit to workplace productivity as well by ensuring more people remain healthy. For example, the average flu season causes a loss of 1.5 million working days in Canada.v

The following Sustainable Solutions Report outlines the results of a study of Canadian general practitioners (GPs) and demonstrates the support the medical community and the public have for pharmacists administering vaccinations. It concludes with a set of recommendations that should be implemented nationally to expand the role of pharmacists in this key area of preventative medicine.

Domenic Pilla
President,
Shoppers Drug Mart
The **Sustainable Solutions Report: A Focus on Immunization** is the second in a series of reports that will be issued by Shoppers Drug Mart exploring different ways pharmacists can contribute to reforming our health care system through cost-cutting, wait times reduction, improving patient care and generally making Canadians healthier.

This Report is endorsed by the Pharmacists’ Association of Newfoundland and Labrador, the Prince Edward Island Pharmacists’ Association, and the New Brunswick Pharmacists’ Association.

As part of the Report, research was conducted with Canadian family physicians to find out their views on expanding the role of pharmacists in the health care system and the value of having pharmacists provide immunizations. The goal of this research is to demonstrate support from the wider health care community and the public for pharmacy solutions to health care reform.

The physician research was conducted by Environics Research Group with 204 general practitioners and completed online from May 14 to May 27, 2013. A probability sample of the same size would yield a margin of error of +/- 6.9 points, 19 times out of 20.
Why It Makes Dollars and “Sense” for Pharmacists to Administer Flu Vaccines

Flu has a serious impact on Canadians and the health care system, and pharmacists can play a more active role to reduce the burden.

The Burden Is Big
Each year in Canada:

- 10–25% of the population will get the flu
- Up to 75,000 people will be hospitalized because of flu
- 2,000 to 8,000 people will die due to flu-related complications

Pharmacists’ Role in Raising Vaccination Rates\textsuperscript{xii}
The number of Albertans vaccinated over the last two years has increased by more than 19% as pharmacists are taking on a greater role in vaccinating. Alberta pharmacists have been able to vaccinate the longest, and over time other provinces have the same potential.

Saving Lives and Bottom Lines
When pharmacists vaccinate, more people get vaccinated, which reduces the number of people needing costly flu-related hospital care.

\textit{Ontario: An Example}

\begin{table}
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
Year & Total Immunized by Physicians & Total Immunized by Pharmacists & Total Immunized by Alberta Health Services \\ 
\hline
2010 & 75,620 & 43,261 & 504,445 \\ 
2011 & 73,066 & 89,462 & 517,993 \\ 
2012 & 67,149 & 169,494 & 506,904 \\ 
\hline
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\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{chart.png}
\caption{Percentage of Alberta Population Immunized}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{chart2.png}
\caption{Saving Lives and Potential Savings of Acute Care Costs}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{vii} Government of Alberta data, November 2013
Family doctors are supportive of pharmacists playing an expanded role in primary care and acknowledge Canadians can benefit from the added convenience and easier access pharmacists can offer.

- Four in five general practitioners (79%) are supportive of retail pharmacists playing an expanded role in primary care.
- Forty per cent of family doctors say patients will benefit from an expanded role for pharmacists by getting quicker access to some services.
- More than three quarters of physicians (78%) agree pharmacists’ services are easier to access than those of physicians.

**Generally speaking, how supportive are you of having the following health care professionals play an expanded role in primary care?**

- **Nurse Practitioners**: 20% Very Supportive, 33% Supportive, 30% Somewhat Supportive, 12% Not Very Supportive, 5% Not at All Supportive
- **Retail Pharmacists**: 16% Very Supportive, 31% Supportive, 32% Somewhat Supportive, 17% Not Very Supportive, 4% Not at All Supportive
- **Chiropractors**: 5% Very Supportive, 13% Supportive, 20% Somewhat Supportive, 42% Not Very Supportive, 20% Not at All Supportive
- **Acupuncturists**: 4% Very Supportive, 12% Supportive, 39% Somewhat Supportive, 29% Not Very Supportive, 16% Not at All Supportive
- **Naturopaths**: 3% Very Supportive, 5% Supportive, 13% Somewhat Supportive, 36% Not Very Supportive, 43% Not at All Supportive

Physicians are supportive of pharmacists playing a bigger role in administering immunizations, particularly flu vaccinations.

- More than two thirds of general practitioners (67%) say they trust pharmacists to give flu vaccinations, and an additional 61% say pharmacists in all provinces should be given the authority to give flu vaccinations.
- Another 61% agree giving pharmacists the ability to vaccinate for flu will improve immunization rates, and more than half of physicians (53%) agree it is more convenient for their patients to go to a pharmacy for their flu vaccinations.
- Sixty-three per cent of doctors agree pharmacists are qualified to administer flu vaccinations.
Building on the physician support previously outlined, other recent research shows the general public is also in favour of pharmacists administering immunizations, including for flu.

**Canadians would choose to get their flu vaccines at a community pharmacy and acknowledge pharmacists provide a more convenient source for immunization.**

- A recent study by the Canadian Pharmacists Association found 48% of Canadians said they would likely choose to get their flu shot at a pharmacy if the service was available in their province, and a further 45% said the same of vaccinations overall.

- Also of note was that Alberta (62%) and British Columbia (56%) had the highest percentage of people agreeing they would choose to get their flu shot at a pharmacy, and they are the provinces where this service has been offered the longest.

- Almost half (46%) of Canadians are of this opinion because the service is convenient and they could get it done quickly by a pharmacist.
Flu and other preventable illnesses can have a significant impact on Canadians’ health and the health care system, which is why immunization is an essential tool in maintaining public health.

Pharmacists are trusted health care professionals and medication experts who have the knowledge and skills to support physicians and public health in providing immunizations and delivering convenient and accessible services to all Canadians.

The problem is pharmacists’ ability to immunize is not available consistently across the country. Individuals in some provinces can get vaccines administered by a pharmacist, while people in many parts of the country – like Quebec, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador, Yukon, Nunavut, and Northwest Territories – cannot. This needs to change.

**Steps must be taken now to ensure all provinces and territories offer equal access to immunizations through community pharmacies.**
Recommendations

The broader pharmacy community is well-positioned to take on this role, but we need the government’s help to do so. Below are three recommendations of how provincial and territorial governments can make changes to take full advantage of pharmacists’ expertise in the area of immunization.

1. **Enable Pharmacists Across the Country to Administer Flu Vaccinations:** Enabling pharmacists to administer flu vaccinations is estimated to increase immunization rates by 1% to 3%. That brings with it the added financial benefit of not having to provide and pay for acute care to as many sick people. For example, it is estimated that in Newfoundland and Labrador alone the savings could reach $1.1 million.

   Currently, pharmacists in the following five provinces can offer flu vaccinations: British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. That means more than half of the provinces and territories still do not have convenient access to this essential service through their local pharmacies. Pharmacists in all jurisdictions nationally should be granted the authority to vaccinate for flu.

2. **Enable Pharmacists Across the Country to Administer Other Common Vaccinations:** Only pharmacists in British Columbia, Alberta, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia currently have the ability to administer a broad range of injections, including those to prevent illnesses such as seasonal influenza, hepatitis A or B, varicella, herpes zoster, human papillomavirus (HPV), tetanus, pneumococcal, and diphtheria. Pharmacists in all jurisdictions nationally should be granted this same authority.

3. **Improve the Ability to Provide Patient Updates through Electronic Communication:** Physicians, pharmacists and public health workers must keep each other updated on patients’ immunization status, and effective e-communications between all parties is essential. An electronic communications infrastructure is currently being developed in Canada, but there is an opportunity for the broader pharmacy community to be more deeply involved in the development to ensure those on the front-lines using the technology provide input on the most effective tools to use.
About Shoppers Drug Mart Corporation

Shoppers Drug Mart Corporation is one of the most recognized and trusted names in Canadian retailing. The Company is the licensor of full-service retail drug stores operating under the name Shoppers Drug Mart (Pharmaprix in Québec). With more than 1,242 Shoppers Drug Mart and Pharmaprix stores operating in prime locations in each province and two territories, the Company is one of the most convenient retailers in Canada. The Company also licenses or owns 57 medical clinic pharmacies operating under the name Shoppers Simply Pharmacy (Pharmaprix Simplement Santé in Québec) and six luxury beauty destinations operating as Murale. As well, the Company owns and operates 62 Shoppers Home Health Care stores, making it the largest Canadian retailer of home health care products and services. In addition to its retail store network, the Company owns Shoppers Drug Mart Specialty Health Network Inc., a provider of specialty drug distribution, pharmacy and comprehensive patient support services, and MediSystem Technologies Inc., a provider of pharmaceutical products and services to long-term care facilities.

Together with its Associate-owners, the Shoppers Drug Mart/Pharmaprix retail pharmacy network employs close to 6,000 pharmacists in the communities we serve from coast to coast.
References


vii Government of Alberta data, November 2013


