

Editorial

Pharmacists in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil: where are we?

O farmacêutico no enfrentamento da COVID-19 no Brasil: onde estamos?

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The pandemic of the infection caused by the new SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus (COVID-19) brought the world an unprecedented social and economic rupture. The expressive number of cases in countries such as the United States of America, Brazil, and India, and the difficulty in controlling the disease can be seen as a reflection of the extreme socioeconomic inequalities in the health care offer. With more than 28 million cases in the world, the spread of COVID-19 continues to occur in Brazil, which, on September 6th, 2020, accounted for 4,092,832 confirmed cases, and 125,521 deaths.¹ The spread of the disease in communities where people live in precarious conditions can cause even greater health problems. The crisis situation required and keeps requiring from the health system a high response capacity to assist the large number of people infected and continuity of care directed to other acute and chronic diseases. In addition, the unstable health management in Brazil, allied to the big political and ideological polarization, increases the challenges in the implementation of public health care measures to contain the advancement of the disease.

Up to the present day, the absence of definite protocols for the treatment of COVID-19 has shown great diversity of conducts in the clinical practice. The worrying and significant increase in the sale of drugs for self-medication puts the population's health at risk and indicates the need for better strategies aimed at patient safety. The dynamic production of scientific knowledge, with several controversial results, has been raising opposing and emphatic opinions on the therapeutic approach to the use of, for instance, chloroquine/hydroxychloroquine, and ivermectin, among other medications. This reality invites us to sharpen critical thinking and to discuss the importance of science in order to elucidate the effectiveness and safety profile of the treatments. These aspects become critical due to the little time of accrued experience in the management of COVID-19, the countless clinical trials still ongoing, and the need for rapid decision-making in the front line of care. In this scenario, the need becomes evident for the pharmacists to incorporate into their practice the theoretical framework of pharmacoepidemiology and of the evaluation of health technologies to assure evidence-based care.

Pharmaceutical assistance suffered significant modifications to adapt to the new demands of the population and of the health services. Due to the continental characteristics of Brazil, the actions have been developed according to the demands of each region and their availability of financial and human resources. The pharmacists have been acting on different work fronts for diagnosis support, guidance to the population, planning of the pharmaceutical assistance, and clinical activities in private and public hospitals and health services. The restructuring of the services requires great dedication to train technical teams, redesign workflows, and reformulate care protocols to increase the safety of patients and professionals alike.² Several entities have contributed to the training of pharmacists and to the alignment of requirements for the quality of the work processes during the pandemic, both at the national (the Federal Council of Pharmacy, the Brazilian Society of Hospital Pharmacy and Health Services³, and the Institute for Safe Practices in the Use of Medications (*Instituto para Práticas Seguras no Uso de Medicamentos*, ISMP Brazil),⁴ among others) and international (International Pharmaceutical Federation, FIP⁵) levels. In this context, the expansion in the use of information technologies was fundamental to make professional interaction and knowledge dissemination possible by means of remote debates, courses, and training. In the teaching field, undergraduate and

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graduate courses, especially in the health area, face the need to reinvent effective teaching methods with the remote offer of academic subjects with essentially practical activities for the continuity of training.

One of the most striking challenges has been the difficulty in purchasing health products. These products had a large increase in consumption worldwide, generating shortages due to increased demand, lack of raw materials, and manufacturing discontinuity. In Brazil, the maintenance of the supply chain has faced import difficulties, exorbitant prices, demands for reduced payment deadlines, and non-fulfillment of agreed upon deadlines and quantities.² As a result, there are variations in the offer of medications considered essential, such as sedatives, neuromuscular blockers, vasoactive amines, and antimicrobials. The commitment of the pharmacists and the search for innovative replenishment strategies have helped to minimize the impact on care. The pandemic exposed to society the problem of medication shortage and its impact on health care, in addition to showing the fragilities of the health, science, and technology sectoral policies. The establishment of well-articulated policies in these areas is essential for the country to develop its autonomy in the production of supplies and medicines.⁶ The pharmacist acting in the research and development of drugs and medicines, from production to use, contributes to this autonomy and shows the value of the profession for society.

Another critical point is the planning of care for the patients with chronic diseases who have had their access to exams and follow-up reduced during the pandemic. Late diagnoses, leading to delay in the assessment of the clinical condition and the use of medications, can increase morbidity and mortality. Remote services, especially telepharmacy, is a strategy that has been used in several Brazilian states, although it needs to expand its reach to a greater proportion of the population.² This assistance modality is one of the initiatives that must be improved in order to qualify the follow-up process of medication use by outpatients in the post-pandemic period.

The patients with COVID-19 that evolve to severe or critical diseases can be considered as at high risk in the use of medicines, demanding pharmacotherapeutic follow-up to optimize the clinical results and to prevent adverse events. The introduction of the pharmacist in multidisciplinary teams, including programs to manage the use of antimicrobials, such as stewardship, can bring great contributions to integrated work and to patient safety^{2,7}. The inadequate use of antimicrobials, already described in the management of the disease, can boost microbial resistance growth, considered a severe public health problem, and generate an impact in the post-pandemic period.⁸ The transition between the different health care levels also demands qualified management of pharmacotherapy and the use of health education strategies. It is also emphasized that the participation of the pharmacists in experimental and observational studies in the pandemic context is a relevant action field for the production of new knowledge. In addition, the discovery of the so expected vaccine will also benefit from the pharmaceutical support to help managing the supply, storing, and distribution for a wide vaccination coverage.⁷

The health professionals have done their best in the context of the pandemic and deserve notable recognition for their dedication. The psychological impact is a serious complicating factor, considering the abrupt change in the work environments, the fear of infection, and the new reality imposed by social isolation that involves deprivation of the usual human interaction, excessive communication through technological "windows" or between people with their faces hidden by the masks. In the professional environment, these questions need to be identified and treated responsibly to minimize the negative effects on productivity. What will we learn from this moment? In times of crisis, there are also opportunities to review values and to generate personal and professional growth. For us, pharmacists, reflecting on these issues can drive us to channel energies to fulfill our crucial role before society.

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