

How IT can deliver the time and support that pharmacy needs to deliver new services

Pharmacy First could pave the way for pharmacy to become the backbone of primary care in England – but pharmacists will need investment and support to deliver. Clanwilliam is committed to making the scheme a success and is investing in the technology solutions that will be required, says Jon Williams, product owner of RxWeb.

We all know the healthcare system is under enormous pressure, and the only way to alleviate that pressure in a sustainable way is to address it at source.

If we collectively want to reduce pressure on GPs, out-of-hours services, and EDs, we need to re-think our service touchpoints, so patients don't just access care faster, but obtain the advice and care they need earlier.

One of those key touchpoints is pharmacy, which has the potential to become the backbone of primary care in the UK and to provide valued advice and support to patients, while continuing in its traditional role as a trusted supplier of medicines.

The UK government has started to recognise this potential. Over the past few years, it has turned to pharmacies to deliver vaccinations and basic health checks, alongside other primary care providers. Then, at the start of the year, it took a big step forward with the launch of Pharmacy First in England.

Pharmacy First is a huge opportunity: but pharmacy is under pressure

Pharmacy First enables pharmacies to supply over the counter and prescription medicines for seven common conditions (sinusitis, sore throat, earache, infected insect bites, the bacterial skin infection impetigo, shingles, and uncomplicated UTIs in women).

However, that simple description understates the importance of the scheme, which could pave the way for pharmacy to become the first port of call for primary care in the UK.

The challenge is that pharmacies are also under pressure. A survey for a recent ITV Tonight investigation found that 48% of the 980 pharmacists who responded were worried they wouldn't have the capacity to deliver Pharmacy First.

More than 400 pharmacies have closed every year for the past four years, and that is pushing a lot of additional work onto those that are left. In a recent meeting, I heard that the average pharmacy is dealing with 8,569 prescription items per month – and that's squeezing the time available for additional services.

The survey also heard concerns about a shortfall in funding for Pharmacy First and the ongoing shortage of medicines. To address these challenges, additional investment and support will be essential.

Investment and support are needed: and technology is key

A huge component of that investment and support will need to come from technology. Clanwilliam, the global healthcare technology group and home of RxWeb, has an unwavering commitment to making Pharmacy First a success and is working with user groups and customers to identify the tools that will be required.

We are investing in our leading pharmacy system, RxWeb, to make the process of dispensing and delivering medicines to patients faster and more efficient, so pharmacists have the capacity to take on services. And we're developing an RxWeb Services platform to enable pharmacists to book, deliver and claim for services.

One-Click Dispensing: In 2021, we introduced One-Click Dispensing. This uses a series of algorithms to check whether prescriptions downloaded to the 'To Be Dispensed' queue are eligible for One-Click (broadly, because the patient has been prescribed them before).

If they are, then One-Click runs through 12 automated checks, creating time for the pharmacist to work on something else. Working with a test pharmacy handling around half of those 8,569 items each month, we found that 72% of prescriptions could go through One-Click: which saved around 19 hours of pharmacist time per month, or 228 hours per year.

Clinical Checking screen: We then looked at the prescriptions that can't go through One-Click, because they fail one of those 12 automated checks. Our Clinical Checking screen, highlights to pharmacists where the prescription has failed at an item level, so they only have to conduct those checks manually.

Listening to feedback from our customers, we have found that their pharmacists now typically spend an hour going through the scripts requiring clinical checks in the morning, before moving on to other work, and then coming back to it at lunchtime.

Accuracy check and BagTracker: At the end of the One-Click process, we have an Accuracy Check, to make sure that the label matches the pack and the patient.

We have also created a BagTracker app to help dispensing staff keep track of where items are in the pharmacy and locate them quickly. This was born out of conversations with customers that told us finding misplaced bags can take up to 45 mins of their staff's time.

With BagTracker, once items have been dispensed and bagged, staff can scan the barcode on the storage location and then scan the patient barcode on the bags and enter them into the location or locations. When adding the bag, an SMS can also be sent to the patient to advise them that their meds are ready to collect.

When the patient arrives, BagTracker will tell the user where the bag or bags are located eg shelf, fridge, CD cabinet etc. This dramatically reduces the time spent locating bags, whilst improving the patient experience.

RxWeb Services: Launching in the spring, our new services application will provide an integrated solution for services.

Our appointment led application will allow pharmacies and their customers to book appointments for services. Slots can be tailored by the pharmacy to suit the service type and length of consultations, which will also be displayed to patients on the services app to book.

We are also integrating our video consultation system into the application, so pharmacies can set up virtual appointments for patients who want them. Once an appointment commences, the application will generate a questionnaire to guide and capture the consultation.

Starting with the New Medicine Service, we will then build in further service questionnaires to cover all the key services. As we add these services we will also be integrating them with the NHS APIs to receive referrals and send claims directly to the Manage Your Service system.

Clanwilliam is creating the tools for success

RxWeb is able to make these developments because it is part of Clanwilliam, which operates internationally but still has a deep understanding of the needs of the NHS and its providers.

Our reach means we have been able to bring useful ideas from Ireland to the UK and develop them to meet the specific needs of our pharmacy customers in the new environment in which they are operating.

Another good example of our approach is the launch of our product Epic Care in the UK, which should also happen later this year. Epic Care is Clanwilliam's aged care software solution that is used in care homes, which have their own challenges in providing care and accessing GP and emergency services.

Our intention is to integrate Epic Care with RxWeb, to provide a more complete solution for care home staff and residents, so they have easier access to advice, support, and medicines – when and where they need it.

It's all part of our vision, which is for a better resourced, more effective, and sustainable healthcare system, and our commitment, which is for putting in the investment and technical resources needed to deliver that.

We are excited about Pharmacy First, so we are investing in the development of the tools it will require, starting with new functionality in RxWeb to free up pharmacy time and moving on to a new delivery platform.

With this support in place, we are confident that our pharmacy customers will be able to make a huge success of the scheme. And by doing that, they will reduce the pressure on other parts of the healthcare system, while improving access and care for patients.