

COVID-19 Vaccines Distribution – Lessons learnt

Maximising the established supply chain to ensure effective and efficient population vaccination

Returning to business as usual

With EU Member States hitting inoculation targets now is the right time to consider their future approach to the supply and distribution of COVID-19 and other vaccines. In view of the current strive to return to “business as usual,” EU countries should maximise their pre-pandemic resources to ensure that future vaccine supply chain logistics (including cold chain) are overseen by those most familiar with the management, delivery and supply of medicines and other vaccines: full-service healthcare distributors (FSDH).

As the vital link between 3,450 manufacturers and more than 170,000 pharmacies and other dispensing points such as hospitals and healthcare centres, FSDH are in a pivotal position to effectively and efficiently manage the distribution of future vaccinations across EU communities. Having an existing capacity that is immediately available for use, EU Member States must now recognise the available infrastructure that is the full-service healthcare distribution sector and act rapidly to mobilise this expertise and experience to deal with such public health emergencies in the future.

Meeting supply and demand – examples from our sector

Based on their expertise, dedication, and professionalism, FSDH are key to ensuring that patients are always supplied with medicines quickly and reliably. This has been made even more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic as full-service healthcare distributors work tirelessly to ensure a swift and efficient distribution of all healthcare products and vaccines to supply all communities across the EU.¹ FSDH have proven both their flexibility and resilience during the COVID-19 crisis and more recently in the COVID-19 vaccination campaign and Member States must recognize the value and efficacy of the sector in ensuring the future supply of all medicines and the distribution of all future vaccines.

Transition from temporary relief to permanent, sustainable solutions

As it becomes clear that annual vaccinations (booster shots) against the COVID-19 may well be required and almost inevitable, Member States must also shift their approach to the virus (temporary relief, short term solutions) to a more long-term focus with sustainable solutions. Should Member States be required to administer annual COVID-19 vaccinations, they can no longer afford to keep COVID-19 vaccines efforts in their sole control, organising mass vaccinations at specific centres or locations every year, enlisting military aid, circulating new campaigns to ensure that each citizen gets the next round of the COVID-19 shot and so on – there is a better way. Member States must start deconstructing these costly centres and abrupt measures taken in the peak of the pandemic and relocate COVID-19 vaccinations back into communities through pharmacies and other community-based healthcare professionals, supported by their FSDH.

Connecting the dots, filling the gaps

Pharmacies as well as other community-based healthcare professionals (HCPs), supplied by FSDH, have always played an important public health role in keeping people healthy with advice and short term medications;

¹ https://services.girp.eu/system/files/memberarea/girp_overview_of_covid-19_vaccines_distribution_-_april_2021_revised.pdf?destination=system/files/memberarea/girp_overview_of_covid-19_vaccines_distribution_-_april_2021_revised.pdf

vaccinations are simply an extension of this public health role. Pharmacies and other community-based HCPs connect the dots by serving as a location for information about COVID-19 vaccinations, as well as a place to receive them. Pharmacists and other community-based HCPs are in a pivotal position to increase awareness on the availability and importance of getting vaccinated and identify those patients who may benefit from specific COVID-19 vaccinations (i.e. target groups). This increased awareness also helps patients to make informed decisions to protect themselves as well as their loved ones. By increasing awareness about the availability and importance of vaccinations, patients can make informed decisions to protect themselves and their family members, which, in turn, will maximise uptake.

With Member States and the healthcare supply chain now fully engaged in one of the most important immunization efforts in living memory, GIRP members have demonstrated their ability to respond effectively to the extraordinary demands for critical medicines from the COVID-19 crisis. As new and high volumes of vaccines become available, FSHD partnership with community pharmacies and other community HCPs as well as with all existing healthcare channels should be leveraged to ensure efficiency, and ultimately success, in vaccinating as many citizens in the shortest possible timeframe and over the long term as we begin to consider booster shots.

GIRP Key Messages

- ✎ Based on their expertise, dedication, and professionalism, FSHD are key to ensuring that patients can be always supplied with medicines quickly and reliably which was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic as full-service healthcare distributors work tirelessly to ensure a swift and efficient distribution of all healthcare products and vaccines to supply
- ✎ FSHD' partnerships with community pharmacies, other community-based HCPs and other distribution channels should be leveraged to ensure efficiency, and ultimately success in vaccinating as many citizens in the shortest possible timeframe (in their local communities).
- ✎ FSHD support pharmacies and other community-based HCPs' salient role in vaccinating communities and contribute to their evolution by providing a range vaccination services for pharmacists and HCPs including vaccine education, literature on vaccinations and where to receive them, training to counsel patients and screening all patients.
- ✎ FSHD have the longstanding experience and knowledge to support pharmacists and other community-based HCPs' expertise, competency and reliability to deliver COVID-19 vaccinations across all EU Member States.
- ✎ By providing training and other vaccination services, FSHD act as pillars in the trust of pharmacists as trained healthcare providers in their communities who have both complete access to these communities and knowledge of their patient populations.
- ✎ Using national infrastructure, pharmacies and other community-based HCPs can keep track of who has been fully vaccinated and when anticipated booster shots will be needed.
- ✎ Pharmacies and other community-based HCPs, supplied by their FSHD, have always played an important public health role in keeping people healthy with advice and short term medications: vaccinations are simply an extension of this vital public health role available at the heart of all EU communities.