

COVID-19 testing by pharmacists

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PHARMACISTS IN ALBERTA ALREADY HAVE A FEE CODE FOR assessment of patients for COVID-19 and can order COVID-19 tests. However, in July, Alberta began a pilot study of asymptomatic COVID-19 testing in 20 pharmacies. On July 16, as I was about to visit my 88-year-old mother, I thought I should get tested. This is when I met Jasmeen Patel, pharmacy manager at Shoppers Drug Mart in Callingwood, Edmonton. I was impressed with his attitude towards innovative new services, so Dr. Watson and I interviewed him (in between throat swabs . . .).

Tell me about yourself: I am an international pharmacy graduate from India. I moved to Canada (Ontario) in 2012 and studied to be a pharmacy technician to get an idea of Canadian pharmacy practice. I became licensed in 2018 and moved to Alberta because of the better scope of practice.

What made you decide to be involved in the COVID-19 testing pilot for pharmacy? We had been having a lot of questions from patients about testing, as patients were looking for an alternative to the long lines at testing sites. When the pilot program started, I wanted to “go the extra mile” for our patients. I wanted to help out in the pandemic. So, when the pharmacy owner approached me about pilot testing, I jumped into it.

How has it gone? We are now testing patients every day. Our system has gotten more efficient, and now it runs smoothly. Some patients are anxious, but we have learned how to approach these patients and ease their fears. Moving from strep testing to COVID-19 testing was a very easy transition; we just need to swab a little deeper in the throat.

Any challenges? Initially, the workflow was overwhelming for the staff. Now we have an online booking system that has helped. Prior to that, patients were required to book by telephone and the calls were nonstop. The other challenge has been obtaining testing supplies from Alberta Health Services (AHS)—at the moment I only have about 100 tests left. Previously, I chose to go and pick the tests up personally. Now,



AHS is delivering tests to all community pharmacies, as more pharmacies are involved in testing and it takes about 5 to 7 business days to receive supplies.

What do patients think? Patients are appreciative. Ninety-nine percent of people say “you guys are doing amazing.” For patients travelling overseas, it is much easier for them to come

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to the pharmacy and get tested. Right now (in September), school is starting, so we have teachers coming in. In fact, I was thinking of adding a day per week just for teachers. We are also testing nurses, dental hygienists, physicians, physiotherapists and other pharmacists and pharmacy staff.

All of the above contrasts with a recent snap poll from the *Australian Journal of Pharmacy* (www.ajp.com.au), which asked the question, “Do you support COVID-19 testing in pharmacies?” Only 4% said, “Yes, community pharmacies are appropriate centres for testing.” Interestingly, 72% said, “No,

this is a bad idea and puts staff and the public at risk,” and 33% said, “No, I don’t think pharmacists are appropriately trained to conduct COVID-19 tests.” We asked Mr. Patel what he thought of this, and he responded, “It’s not rocket science. It is not technically difficult. The bigger issue is whether pharmacists would accept this change in their practice. How do we want to see our profession in the next 10 to 15 years?”

We asked Mr. Patel what he would say to those pharmacists who are so negative towards getting involved in COVID-19 testing. His reply was, “You get an opportunity; you need to take it. We are frontline health care workers. When patients are sick, they are not going to their physician, they are coming to us. This is an opportunity for us to take our profession a step further. And it’s a help to the community.”

The Alberta COVID-19 testing has now expanded to over 168 pharmacies (<https://www.ab.bluecross.ca/news/asymptomatic-testing.php>), with more on the way, as all Shoppers Drug Mart and Loblaw pharmacies have signed on to do testing. This is another great example of pharmacists stepping up to serve their patients during the pandemic and to demonstrate the evolving primary care role of the pharmacist.

To watch the video of the full interview, please see the Supplemental Material tab of the online version of this article at www.cpjournal.ca.