Community pharmacy is experiencing an alarming rise in aggressive and violent incidents. The worst incident involved two pharmacists (both UCA Executive Committee members) being stabbed in a pharmacy in West Belfast.

UCA surveyed its members who told us about their experiences which can be summarised as follows:

* Aggressive and rude behaviour from patients on a daily basis
* Violent incidents/attempted robberies in the past year
* Attempted/robberies increasingly involving knives or guns
* Increased concern/worry among pharmacy staff and pharmacists about the risk of a violent attack or robbery
* Increased concern among pharmacies about drugs held on the premises being the target of an attack
* Difficulties in getting a successful prosecution / negotiating the legal process

We know about the high profile cases which make the news and at least 4 pharmacists have been physically injured in the past year. However, our survey results were startling:

* **Almost 50% of pharmacies have received verbal abuse or threats from their own patients.**
* **20% have suffered a violent attack were staff where threatened with a weapon.**
* **15% have had a robbery or attempted robbery of cash and/or drugs in the past year.**
* **Less than 40% said they hadn’t suffered violent or aggressive behaviour.**

This was reflected in the surveys undertaken by the Health & Social Care Board over the summer.

Ulster Chemists’ Association has asked the Department of Health and the Health & Social Care Board to provide support for community pharmacies on the frontline of healthcare provision. It is vital that pharmacists and pharmacy staff feel safe and secure in their workplace without the threat of aggressive or violent behaviour. This also applies to those patients and carers who access local pharmacy services each day in Northern Ireland. There should be Zero Tolerance for all healthcare staff working within the NHS regardless of location and all measures possible should be utilised to reduce the risk of injury or abuse to every person working within community pharmacy in Northern Ireland. UCA was therefore delighted to see the relaunch of the Zero Tolerance campaign at the event held in Belfast in September.

**The UCA is recommending the following range of security measures be made available to community pharmacies and good practice policies and procedures be introduced.**

**Measures required to provide adequate security and reassurance to community pharmacies and their staff:**

1. **Panic button / alarm:**

In the event of a robbery, whilst pharmacists and staff should remain calm and comply with the robber’s demands when confronted, they should have a facility to notify authorities that a robbery or attempted robbery is occurring.

*A panic button or alarm system linked directly to the police service will allow staff to raise the alarm discreetly. Police response needs to be immediate.*

**Compliant Alarm system:** BS EN 50131 compliant alarm system which can be linked to the Police Service rapid response unit.

1. **Compliant CCTV camera system:**

Visible, eye-level BS EN 50132 compliant CCTV cameras, should be positioned in areas where they are most likely to pick up clear, identifiable images of the criminal, e.g., outside the door before they enter the store, just inside the door where you may apprehend them, near high value items or the dispensary/counter. Monitors can also be positioned so that shoppers can see the images being captured.

*This will enable the cameras to obtain a better picture of the robber’s face and act as a visual deterrent to would-be thieves. Tip: if you detain a suspected robber, stay in sight of the camera so that it can record what happens until the police arrive.*

*NB. CCTV systems must be registered with the Information Commissioner.*

1. **Adequate safe capacity:**

In many cases, current safe capacity is not adequate to store all ‘at risk’ drugs. Pharmacies must be able to access safes that are fit for purpose and future proofed for changes to safe custody regulations.

*This will ensure that all ‘at risk’ drugs can be stored safely and securely within the pharmacy, deterring would-be robbers.*

1. **Height markers:**

Installed on exit doors and at the pharmacy counter.

*This will enable staff to provide police with a height estimation if a robbery takes place, and will act as a visual deterrent to would-be thieves.*

1. **Adequate security lighting:**

Security lighting installed to deter burglars.

*This will reduce the risk of a robbery as there are fewer dark spaces to conceal their activity.*

1. **Window and door security:**

Installation of physical security features for windows and doors including roller shutters compliant to LPS 1175 security standard.

*These measures may make it harder for a burglar to enter the pharmacy.*

1. **Personal Alarms:**

Personal alarms for all staff working in the pharmacy or working alone in the community.

*This will provide reassurance to staff and allow them to raise the alarm if they are unable to access the pharmacy panic alarm or if they are working alone.*

1. **Signage:**

Inform your customers/patients that crime or verbal aggression is not tolerated on the premises. Do this by erecting posters or signage about the security measures in operation, e.g.,:

* CCTV / you are being monitored
* Time Delay Safe
* Monitored Alarm System
* Shoplifters will be prosecuted

*This will deter would-be robbers by showing them that the premises are secure and they are more likely to be caught.*

*NB. Resources are available to be downloaded from HSCB and Police Service NI websites.*

**Training & education for pharmacy workforce**

1. **Customer service**

*Pharmacy staff should be trained in how to use customer service skills to deter potential criminals.*

1. **How to Deal with Difficult Situations (available through UCA Learning & Development Programme)**

*Provide pharmacy staff with tools and techniques to handle difficult and potentially dangerous situations including robbers, suspected shoplifters, angry or upset customers/clients or staff disputes.*

1. **Personal protection training**

*Provide pharmacy staff with training on how to protect themselves from violent attacks in the pharmacy or off-site. Senior staff may require ‘tiger kidnap’ training.*

1. **Crime & Security training**

*Staff should be given training and instruction on how to prevent or reduce the risk of crime in the pharmacy, what to do if a crime occurs and how to gather/handle evidence afterwards to ensure that the police service have the best possible chance to catch and convict the perpetrator.*

*NB. Crime Prevention Officers from Police Service NI can provide 45minute training sessions at your pharmacy. To find out more call 101 and ask to speak to your local Crime Prevention Unit.*

**Communications Campaign**

1. **Public-facing Zero Tolerance Campaign**

HSCB/DOH must highlight that the Zero Tolerance policy applies to community pharmacies and to highlight the vital role they play in ensuring the health and well-being of the population.

*This will promote greater respect towards pharmacists and pharmacy staff as well as making it clear that:*

* *pharmacy security is a high priority*
* *aggression or violence towards pharmacy staff will not be tolerated and may result in being denied access to services*
* *violence towards pharmacy staff is likely to result in a custodial sentence.*
1. **Community Pharmacy Support Campaign**

HSCB/DOH must publicise the approach they are taking regarding the installation of security measures and the Zero Tolerance campaign with pharmacists and pharmacy staff as the fear of violence is as much of an issue as actual robberies and violent incidents.

*This will promote confidence with all pharmacy staff in the support they have from HSCB/DOH and their employers. These communications will be supported by all pharmacy representative bodies.*

1. **Amend Legislation / Regulations**

HSCB/DOH must seek the amendment of legislation and regulations to allow community pharmacy to refuse services to any person who threatens violence in the community pharmacy or any attendant behaviour. Until this is achieved, HSCB/DoH should ensure that pharmacists understand the regulations currently in force.

*Currently a pharmacy has the right to refuse entry to the premises to any person who has threatened violence to any member of staff. However, there is still a duty to provide pharmaceutical services – pharmacists can make arrangements to provide medicines or services outside the premises or arrange for another pharmacy to take over their care.*

**Employer Policies**

UCA recommends that community pharmacies adopt policies and procedures to reduce the risk of violence and aggression towards staff and to protect them should such incidents occur.

* Customer service rules:

No hoods = no service. Store policies regarding headwear which can potentially disguise a person’s appearance should be implemented and signage installed to support the policy.

* Greet every customer policy:

Staff should try to acknowledge and greet every customer as they enter the pharmacy which may discourage a potential criminal. Showing attention could scare them off as they are hoping to go undetected.

* Lone worker policy:

Any member of staff who is working alone in the pharmacy or off-site, e.g., a pharmacist doing a Managing Your Medicines consultation or a driver delivering prescriptions is vulnerable to violence, aggression or inappropriate behaviour. A Lone Worker Policy assesses that risk and sets out procedures to reduce or eliminate it altogether.

* Access NI checks:

All pharmacy staff working on the dispensing process is eligible for an Access NI check. UCA believes that all pharmacy staff including delivery drivers should be subject to mandatory checks (basic, standard or enhanced) to provide protection and reassurance for the public and the pharmacy.

* Join the Safe Shop Scheme:

Pharmacies should engage with the Safe Shop Scheme or other local networks which can help provide information on crimes in the area, access training or information on crime prevention and new trends and techniques being used by criminals.

**For help and support, contact Ulster Chemists’ Association on 028 9065 6576**

**or email support@uca.org.uk**

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