POSTER ABSTRACT

COVID-19 rapid antigen tests in Belgian community pharmacy: from local needs to a national health service.

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Introduction: It is known that in certain Belgian regions, access to the established care systems is much lower than the national average. The Brussels Capital Region in particular, has a higher concentration of vulnerable people: up to 35% of Brussels’ citizens do not have a doctor and the most vulnerable are often unable to travel.

In the light of the Covid-19 pandemic, antigen testing is a known ‘first line of defence’ test, because it is a relatively simple procedure, and is quicker than other approaches like PCR testing.

Aims: The objective was to identify how community pharmacies could contribute to the Covid-19 testing strategy, especially to meet the local needs identified within the Brussels Capital Region. Furthermore, it was studied if pharmacies had an added value in reaching the specific target group of citizens who were not reached through regular channels.

Results: Through a first pilot project in just 8 community pharmacies, all necessary provisions regarding the test area, personal protection equipment, air circulation, cleaning, etc. were tested and validated. Crucial hygiene measures and required alertness to the emergence of new symptoms or the worsening of certain complaints were described, as were conditions for doctor referral. The results of the pilot project showed that

- Pharmacies did reach the specific target group: Symptomatic citizens over 6 years of age with up to 5 days of symptoms who do not have a doctor or who cannot/will not go to a doctor or test centre.

- Citizens with severe symptoms or at increased risk of serious disease and pregnant women were always referred to a doctor regardless of the test result.

- The average positivity ratio was higher than that of the Brussels’ test centres.

In addition, a huge increase in the number of tests for asymptomatic individuals during the summer months was observed. To support test centres and doctors, as of July 15th, departing travellers/event visitors could also be tested. More than 300,000 persons were tested during the summer period.

From September, the pilot project for symptomatic individuals was extended to 329 pharmacies in specific regions of higher vulnerability. A large network of medical and local experts was involved.
Finally, as of November 1st, all Belgian pharmacies were allowed to perform rapid tests to symptomatic individuals and returning travellers to further support testing capacity. By the end of 2021, more than 2500 active pharmacies had registered nearly 1.25 million tests. The results are made available in real-time to support evidence-based decision making.

**Conclusions:** In addition to raising vaccination awareness, the community pharmacy workforce has shown its capability to complement the testing strategy in reaching out to all citizens, so that infected persons can be detected and isolated quickly and efficiently.

**Implications:** For vulnerable and hard-to-reach citizens, Covid-19 testing in a familiar and close by environment such as the community pharmacy, opens opportunities for future advocacy around NCD/chronic diseases.