

Final Report: Focus Groups with Patients and Caregivers

Community Practice Environment Initiative

The [Community Practice Environment Initiative](#) is aimed at understanding confirmed and potential barriers to patient safety and professional autonomy in community pharmacy through thoughtful, respectful and meaningful collaboration and engagement with pharmacy stakeholders.

As part of this initiative, the Ontario College of Pharmacists (the College) contracted Leger, a 3rd-party market research firm, in July 2020 to conduct a series of focus groups with patients of community pharmacies and caregivers who support patients of community pharmacies.

Focus groups allow for deeper understanding of what patients and caregivers expect of their pharmacy professionals, their experience of receiving care, and their opinions of how their experiences relate to their expectations. The limitation to this approach is that participants cannot be considered a representative sample, and qualitative insights are provided rather than quantifiable data points. The concept of a “practice environment” is not easily converted to a survey format for the collection of quantitative data. Focus groups allow context to be provided and discussion to ensue.

Leger recruited participants based on screening criteria provided by the College. The overall goal was to hear from a mix of patients across the province using the following guidelines:

- Include participants who have visited a community pharmacy and have seen a pharmacist at least 2 times in the last 12 months, with a mix of visit frequencies.
- Include participants from all 5 major regions of the province, with a mix living in rural, suburban and urban communities.
- Include participants from various age groups and household income levels.
- Include participants who are a mix of gender identities.
- Allow participants to self-identify whether they are a member of a minority or marginalized group.

College staff developed the discussion guide that was used by the moderator using input from the patient advisor members of the [Community Practice Environment Advisory Group](#). Staff observed the focus groups, but were not involved in the selection of participants, moderating the focus groups, or writing the report.

The insights provided by these patient/caregiver participants will be part of several pieces of information that the Advisory Group will be provided as they work to develop principles of shared accountability for community pharmacy operations that support patient safety and improved patient outcomes, the [Standards of Practice](#), and quality improvement across the sector.

Report

ONTARIO COLLEGE OF PHARMACISTS

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

July 29, 2019

DATE 2020-07-29 **PROJECT NUMBER** 82275-008



- 4 online focus groups were conducted between July 15 and 16, 2020.
- A total of 40 participants were invited, and 35 attended.
- All participants had visited a community pharmacy and seen a pharmacist at least 2 times in the last 12 months.
- A mix of participants were caregivers (accessing pharmacist for services for someone else), and parents of children <18.
- Participants were drawn from various socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicities, age groups, and genders, in order to reflect the diverse makeup of the Ontario population.
- Every effort was made to ensure an open and fair forum for participants to express their opinions when it comes to pharmacy and pharmacist use. Confidentiality and privacy measures were made explicit prior to the start of each group and are strictly respected in the following report.

Date/time	Location	Methodology	Number of participants
July 15, 2020, 5:00pm EST	Ontario	Online focus group	8
July 15, 2020, 7:30pm EST	Ontario	Online focus group	9
July 16, 2020, 5:00pm EST	Ontario	Online focus group	10
July 16, 2020, 7:00pm EST	Ontario	Online focus group	8

KEY FINDINGS

IN GENERAL, ALL FELT THEIR SAFETY WAS A TOP PRIORITY AT THEIR PHARMACY

- Pharmacy users have a lot of trust in their pharmacy, and no major concerns arose
- All say that their pharmacist takes the time to discuss their medications if desired
- In the end, some still practice caution with their prescription, by doing their own research and asking questions

ALL WERE ON THE SAME PAGE WHEN IT COMES TO THE TOP PRIORITIES FOR PHARMACISTS:

- Awareness of any interactions that may arise with medications patients are taking
- Awareness of their patient's medical history by reviewing their file
- Being a second set of eyes after a doctor writes a prescription.
- Providing the right medication, the right dosage and the right number of pills, as prescribed by the doctor

KEY FINDINGS

ALTHOUGH DOCTORS ARE STILL CONSIDERED THEIR PRIMARY HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONAL, MANY THINK OF THEIR PHARMACIST AS A MEMBER OF THEIR HEALTH CARE TEAM.

Especially if:

- They have a personal relationship with their pharmacist
- They have received a flu shot from their pharmacist
- They have explored talking to their pharmacist about minor ailments
- They have used the private counselling room to discuss something
- They shop at an independent pharmacy (vs a chain pharmacy)

DESPITE THINGS CHANGING AT THEIR PHARMACY DURING COVID-19, NO ONE FELT THEIR SAFETY WAS BEING COMPROMISED.

- Prior to COVID-19, all felt their safety was a top priority.
- Pharmacists met expectations and everything seemed routine
- Pharmacists always took the time to discuss, if desired
- At times in a busy pharmacy or long lines, some were not comfortable to ask the questions they had.

KEY FINDINGS

ALL WERE POSITIVE ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE IN A PHARMACY DURING COVID-19.

- Changes to the pharmacy were acknowledged (plexiglass, masks, gloves etc.)
- Adjustments were made to their regular routine to account for COVID-19 changes (arriving early to pharmacy, allowing more time, ordering online, calling ahead, curbside pickup)
- No one felt their safety was being compromised

ALTHOUGH SAFETY WAS NOT COMPROMISED, MANY STILL HAVE PRIVACY CONCERNS

- Long lines or busy pharmacies takes away from their ability to have a private conversation with the pharmacist
- Unable to use a private consultation room to discuss medications and ask questions

IN GENERAL, IT IS EXPECTED THAT PHARMACIES WILL HAVE ADJUSTED TO THE 'NEW NORMAL' FOR THE FALL. PHARMACY USERS EXPECT:

- That safety will remain a top priority
- The same protocols will remain (plexiglass, masks, gloves etc)
- The ability to fill more than one month prescriptions at a time
- The ability to have virtual or phone conversations with the pharmacist

DETAILED ANALYSIS

"The reason why we go to the Shopper's is that we can order online and have the prescription ready. So that's a big feature for us. It's closer to home, and it's also between work and home"

Those who visit multiple pharmacies:

- Don't necessarily have a relationship with a pharmacist
- Choose whichever is more convenient

Those who visit 1 pharmacy:

- May have established relationship
- Like that their insurance is on file
- Like that their medical history is on file

Why do you visit a pharmacy?

- For themselves
- For their children
- For other family members (spouse, aging parents)

How often?

- Monthly to every couple months
- Those with recurring prescriptions are now going monthly due to COVID-19

Those who visit a bigger pharmacy:

- Multitask with other errands
- More convenient
- Don't care about relationship

Those who visit an independent pharmacy:

- Have a good relationship with pharmacist
- Like supporting the 'little guys'
- Live in small town, so this is their only option

"My pharmacist is great. When I walk in, he knows who I am. Asked me who I'm picking up for that day or else he'll just bring it right to me already ready at the counter if I have to phone them. I don't have to explain who I am or what I need. He's got everything ready for me."

There are processes in place that many see as important for their safety at the pharmacy.

TOP Priorities for Pharmacists:

1. Medications don't interact
2. Review medical history on file

No matter what is happening, the following should always be done:

1. Pharmacist do a second check of the prescription for the patient:
 - Ensure the medication is given to the right person
 - Checking medical history (looking at existing medications), checking medication interactions, and allergies.
 - Checking dosage prescribed by doctor
 - Checking number of pills doctor suggests
2. More automation from doctor's office to pharmacy (ie: not relying on the doctor's handwriting)
3. Pharmacist should be taking the time to discuss the medications being dispensed, especially when it's a new medication
4. Continue to adhere to procedures that the governing body (the OCP) has established

"After leaving the hospital my doctor sent me home with a prescription of Percocets. She also sent me home with a 500 ml bottle of liquid morphine and the fentanyl patches, which was just way too much! Once I put the fentanyl patch on, I was literally drooling on myself. I could feel my heart thumping. This is something the pharmacist should have caught before sending me home."

"Pharmacists should have a responsibility to tell you about things. But a reminder each time, not just when it's a new drug"

"I like the personal touch at the end when you go and you get your prescription from the pharmacist and they take time to explain and especially if it's a new drug that you've never taken before."

Experiences prior to COVID-19 were normal and routine for pharmacy users:

Prior to COVID-19...

- Everything is as expected, and 'transactional' in most situations
- Pharmacist would take the time to go through medication where applicable
- Feel comfortable taking the time to ask questions when needed
- Would consider seeing pharmacist for minor things that they wouldn't have to otherwise see their doctor for.

"It was pretty transactional. It was get in and get out. I talked to the pharmacist sometimes, but usually only for a new medication.. it wasn't a very personal relationship"

"I feel like my prescriptions are always accurate. When I pick it up it's in a clear bag. The technician always double checks it and compares it to the prescription receipt. I feel that those checks are in place, so I feel safe!"

SAFETY AS A PRIORITY PRIOR TO COVID-19?

ALL felt that safety is always a top priority for their pharmacists and pharmacies

"I feel like according to their policies and liability, safety is a priority. But at the end of the day, it's still a corporation, and it's a job to them"

"When I do get a new medication, the pharmacist always takes the time to speak with me about the medication"

"I feel like if they're good at their job, my safety is covered. But at the same time, I know that everyone can make mistakes. So I mean, it's still a chance you take"

"I just want to get in and get out, and not have them explain everything and go into details when there are other people around. If I really have a pressing question that I wanted to ask, I would just ask him there and they were fairly nice, very personal and no real issues"

All COVID-19 protocols implemented were not a surprise to pharmacy users, and in fact, all expect to have these protocols in place at their pharmacy.

"But since the personal protective equipment has been implemented, I find that everybody is adjusting very well, and I feel safe when I go in there"

"I think that the staff are doing a great job of getting their personal protective equipment and being in accordance of the guidelines, and it makes me feel happy and safe to know that I am putting myself in good hands"

Nearly all felt their safety was top priority when they entered the pharmacy

- Plexiglass added to the counter
- Hand sanitizer stations
- Arrows on the floor guiding the direction to walk
- Stickers reminding you to keep distance throughout the store
- Must use debit or credit to pay (vs exchanging cash)
- Pharmacist and other employees are wearing masks, shields and gloves for protection
- No private consultation room to go into for more privacy
- Limit to the number of people allowed in the pharmacy
- No places to sit in the pharmacy (issue for older adults)

"I found that there was really no difference. There is the plexiglass, but I wasn't treated any differently. I didn't find the interactions with my pharmacist any different."

"Yeah, my expectations of the pharmacy are met. I don't know if that's because of the computer system that they're using that indicates my information and everything they need to know. But, for me, everything's been met."

Aside from the physical changes in the pharmacy, no one was concerned about the 'back end protocols' being compromised. All felt their safety was still a top priority.

Other expectations during COVID-19:

- Continue to do their job thoroughly
- Following all COVID-19 protocols in place (ie: wear a mask, gloves, any other protective gear)
- Wash their hands often
- Keep their work environment clean
- Get tested regularly for COVID-19
- Does not comes to work if cold / flu symptoms are present

No one is worried about the pharmacist having less time for them. All felt the quality of work was being met.

"I want to make sure that they're also testing themselves. If they have a sniffle, they should not come to work"

"If someone else is in directly behind me, I just rather not ask it. But if I feel like I really, really need to ask, I would use Google. I would also call the pharmacy or my doctor."

"I didn't feel less safe, but I have changed my patterns a little bit. I try to go early in the morning after I know that they've just done a full clean. And there's less people that have been in and out of the store"

No one was negative about changes during COVID-19. In fact, many adjusted their normal habits to account for the changes:

- Go to pharmacy during lower peak hours
- Call ahead with prescription and pick up later
- Plan shopping trip around prescription, knowing there may be a wait time
- Order online and have prescription delivered

Most felt that even if there were long wait times, they would still take the time to ask any questions they may have about the prescription.

However, some felt that with long lines or a busy pharmacy, they may shy away from asking questions.

- It was suggested that an ability to speak virtually with their pharmacist would be more inviting to ask the questions they have

"That's why I prefer the online sort of pharmacy just because I can ask all the questions I want without someone overhearing."

High expectations are put on their pharmacist to ensure their safety is a top priority. These expectations are supported by the trust pharmacy users have in their pharmacist.



Pharmacy users trust their pharmacist to:

- Provide the right medications, the right dosage, and the right number of pills, as prescribed by their doctor
- Do a double check of what was prescribed by the doctor and inform the patient (and doctor) if something does not seem accurate
- Take the time to discuss their medication (ie: how to take it, when to take it, and how many to take), especially if it is a new medication
- Make them aware of interactions with other medications (or herbal supplements) being taken
- Be aware of allergies and medical history of patients
- Store medications properly at the pharmacy (ie: temperature controlled, or proper expiry dates considered)
- Stay up-to-date on their education and trainings
- Provide a holistic approach where applicable (non-medical treatment)
- Help with insurance
- Provide a generic version option where applicable (to help patients save money)

No one feels their safety is being compromised before or during COVID-19, and all feel the above are still top priorities for their pharmacist / pharmacy.

Despite pharmacy users having a great deal of trust in their pharmacist, caution is still practiced by most.

FEW concerns about safety were mentioned:

- In bigger pharmacies, prescriptions handled by many (more than one pharmacist and / or pharmacy technician) and could lead to errors.
- Giving the right medication to the right person, especially if you're picking up for someone else, is sometimes a concern
- Human error when handling prescriptions
- Does appear to be busy or understaffed at times

"I feel it's the same concern I would have in a major chain where the employees and technicians and pharmacists are always changing shifts. I feel like it's just another safety concern to be added because it makes it a little bit harder for them to keep control of you as an individual and what you're doing and what's going on with you."

"I feel like I put that onus [getting the correct medications] more on my doctor than I do pharmacists, because every prescription just comes from him directly. "

Although pharmacy users trust their pharmacist a lot, when it comes down it, they put the onus on their doctor to ensure they are receiving the right diagnosis and right prescription.

Pharmacy users still should self advocate by:

- Asking questions
- Doing their own research

"I have a habit of checking on my phone to see what exactly the prescription is before I drop it off at the pharmacy. I want to make sure that I know what to expect with the side effects "

"The only thing that I've always been concerned about is how there's no secondary check for ID when you pick up prescriptions"

"There's always people in line. I don't think I've ever been there where there hasn't been a bit of a lineup"

These concerns are based on observations of the pharmacy environment, and how some environments contribute to concerns related to patient safety.

"Although I do trust the pharmacist, and I do expect them to be knowledgeable about it. I'm not going to go in completely blind. I will do my bit of research to make sure I'm protecting myself and my family."

"It's important to speak up because the pharmacist may be busy, and they may be looking at the next customer. But if you don't say that you have a question regardless of how much information they've given you, it is hard for them to know"

Nearly all have experienced wait times or busy pharmacies at some point, with some mentioning they would not ask their pharmacist questions with a long line behind them.

"I've waited up to 45 minutes because it has been busy. I would rather have to wait and be assured that my prescriptions are being filled properly."

"I feel safe now on it. It's just when it's busy, I find I feel a little bit rushed. They're not as willing to sit there and answer all your questions when it is busy. They sort of rush you. A lot of times I have questions about either medications or different prescriptions or some over the counter medications."

All still feel safe when the pharmacy gets busy, however perceptions of safety were influenced for some pharmacy users by how busy the pharmacy is.

"I don't want to talk with everyone around me about what my prescription is for. So sometimes, depending on what it is, I just don't ask any questions, as there's just no privacy."

"Yeah, I feel safe enough. I think the only thing with busy pharmacies is the organization behind the counter, I think sometimes it falls apart when it's very busy. There is, at most three people on the other side of the counter. So there's not a lot of resources, and with 5 or 20 people in line, I think they just feel rushed. But I still feel safe."

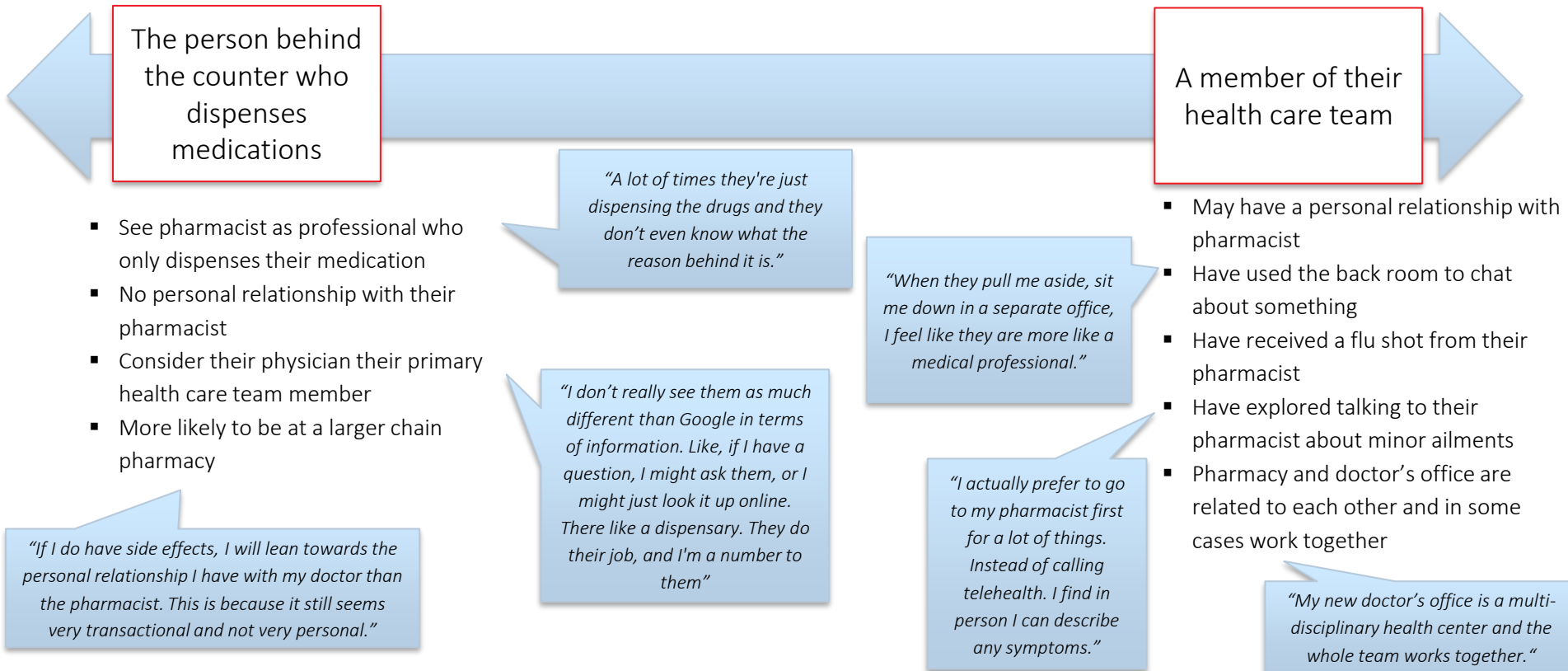
In fact, many account for a busy pharmacy by:

- Calling ahead to have the prescription prepared in advance
- Dropping off their prescription and doing errands during their wait time
- Visiting the pharmacy during less busy hours
- Online ordering and delivery
- Calling ahead and doing curbside pick up
- Switching pharmacies in the case of waiting too long too often

"I've never had any concerns that the pharmacy wasn't safe. If it is busy, maybe they just won't spend as much time with you, going over details or reviewing and doing the double checking. However, I'm sure they have a process in place where they're checking".

"I used to go to the Costco Pharmacy, but I changed just because of the huge lineups and the wait times there. It had nothing to do with not feeling safe."

Respondents were split when it came to whether they considered their pharmacist a member of their healthcare team.



At first several pharmacy users did not consider their pharmacist a member of their health care team, however many were swayed after listening to comments provided by other respondents.

After some consideration, pharmacy users were able to come up with reasons that their pharmacist is or could become a member of their health care team.

Pharmacy users may be more likely to think of their pharmacist as a member of their healthcare team, if:

- They could have a relationship with their pharmacist
- Their pharmacist took an interest in their health
- Could use a private consultation room to discuss more personal conversations.
- The pharmacist interacted with their doctor to discuss health care plans

"I think a relationship would help. I don't normally see the same pharmacist week after week, when I go in. I grew up in a really small town, and there was one pharmacist and growing up I remember my mom having a very personal relationship with him because we go in there regularly."

"I don't think their in depth knowledge of your particular health concerns is enough to be able to be considered part of the team. They would have to be much more available to you. Like everyone says, You see different pharmacist. You have 45 different people you're dealing with. So unless you can have the one on one attention, and consistently see the same person, than it's really not in depth enough."

"I feel like if there was that same type of communication where all of the health care providers meet up to discuss one patient, for example if you were switching medications, and trying to make something work. If the pharmacist themselves was also involved. I think that's something that would make me feel more of a patient versus a customer, because they're involved in the decision made and part of the team."

Pharmacy users were more likely to say they considered themselves a customer vs. a patient when visiting their pharmacy. In some cases, depending on the type of interaction they have with their pharmacist, some consider themselves both a patient and customer.

Customer

- More transactional interactions
- Pharmacies are a business
- More likely to be at a larger pharmacy (ie: Shopper's, Costco, Walmart)
- No relationship with the pharmacist

"I don't really feel like I have a relationship with the pharmacist or pharmacy technicians that work here just because it is a chain."

"The interactions that I have with the pharmacist, I feel more like a customer than a patient."

Both

- Many considered themselves to be both a patient and a customer depending on the interaction.

"Okay, I'm torn because the nature of their relationship is that you are purchasing with transactional aspect, you are a customer, but if you're discussing your medications or your overall health, then you feel like a patient."

Patient

- Have a relationship
- Feel comfortable asking questions and reviewing prescription(s)
- Pharmacy knows medical history / other medications
- Have received a flu shot

"If you're going for your flu shot and the pharmacist is giving it to you, I think in that scenario, I would feel like the patient."

No major concerns were brought up when thinking about the fall and COVID-19.

Pharmacy users have some expectations, when thinking about using their pharmacy in the fall:

- That all COVID-19 protocols are in place (ie: masks, gloves, distancing rules etc)
- Reassurance that even though COVID-19 is still present, that everyone is safe when in a pharmacy
- Ability to fill more than 1 month at a time, which would avoid going into the pharmacy as often
- Ability to have virtual care (or phone calls) with pharmacist to discuss medications, answer questions etc
- Ability for home delivery of medications
- Ability to order more prescriptions online, instead of going in the store
- Ensure the ability to have a personal interaction with the pharmacist is still possible

"Yeah, I think I might even prefer it over the phone just because then you could have your computer in front and quickly google things or check things during the conversation. It is also a little more private."

"He has suggested that if I want at any time I can switch to having my medications delivered. So I'm definitely thinking of doing that in the fall if things get worse."

"I like going in to see my pharmacists. But if things got really ugly and that was the only way to communicate, I could be in touch with them over the phone."

In general, it is expected that pharmacies will have adjusted to the 'new normal' for the fall. Many suggested that pharmacists may be busy and may spend less time with patients, however they do not believe this compromises their safety.

Pharmacy users are open to the idea of virtual or telephone consults instead of talking in person.

In fact, pharmacy users gave several advantages to speaking with their pharmacist virtually (vs in-person)

- Offers more privacy
- Feel more comfortable talking about more sensitive topics
- May not feel as rushed because of a busy pharmacy
- Can take notes while speaking to the pharmacist
- Have computer in front of you to use as a resource

"I feel much more comfortable with a virtual call, than actually going in"

"I feel like virtual could be better than in-person because sometimes you don't want to talk with everyone around you about what your prescription is for"

"I might even prefer it over the phone just because then if I have a computer in front of me I can quickly google things or check up things in the conversation that I can't do necessarily do in person. I feel like if you're over the phone than you might actually get more information out of vaccine conversation than you would of in person. And that it is a little more private and everything else."

"Privacy would be an added benefit of meeting with that pharmacist by teleconference or video conference, as well as what others said about having more personal attention. And not feeling like they're so busy and everyone else is waiting for you."

Many were unsure of the specific roles the College plays for the public, however keeping everyone safe was top of mind

EXPECTATIONS FROM THE COLLEGE:

- Continue to ensure safety of patients is a top priority
- Continue to use the processes that are already in place
- Continue to perform routine assessments
- Ensure the service being provided is 'done to code'
- Expectations for flu shot at the pharmacy
- Ensure pharmacies have a private room
- Suspending pharmacist where applicable – mishandling or stealing medications
- Random spot checks
- More cohesiveness between pharmacies – data to be shared between pharmacies

"They are kind of ultimately accountable. So I think that they have a duty to do an inspection of some type."



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