

Written evidence submitted by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society (MMDB19)

We welcome the broad aim of the Medicines and Medical Devices Bill to support the nation's health and ensure an appropriate legal and regulatory framework for medicines and medical devices following the UK's departure from the European Union.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated just how important it will be to ensure the UK is a world leader in the development and manufacture of medicines and medical devices. As the Government continues to discuss the UK's future relationship with the EU, we agree that UK patients should not be disadvantaged by having to wait for innovative treatments.

While some additional topics relating to the Bill are mentioned in explanatory notes, much of the detail of the delegated powers will depend on the secondary legislation to be brought forward at a later date. Some key areas include potential changes to 'hub and spoke' dispensing, as well as proposals to expand the role of healthcare professionals concerning who can supply, administer and prescribe medicines.

We would welcome a commitment from the Government to engage widely with stakeholders as these proposals are developed further, including with professional bodies, to evaluate what changes might mean for patients and professional practice, and agree what guidance or information might be needed for health professionals or, where appropriate, the general public to support implementation.

We agree with the Government's aim of supporting safe and timely patient access to medicines and this must also be underpinned by appropriate access to pharmacists' clinical expertise and advice. This will be crucial to supporting patient care in the coming months, as the NHS learns to cope with delivering services in light of COVID-19. Supporting medicines safety, boosting public health and prevention, and reducing avoidable hospital admissions will be key to managing demand on a system with reduced capacity.

We continue to hear about shortages of certain medicines, especially with rising demand from treatment of COVID-19. We have also heard from pharmacists concerned about the potential longer-term impact of the pandemic on medicines manufacturing. These concerns have been echoed in recent media reports.ⁱ In February the Government said it is examining how COVID-19 could affect the medicines supply chain.ⁱⁱ

COVID-19 has seen an emphasis on pharmacists being empowered to do the right thing for patients. Regulations need to support professional decision-making and pharmacists should continue to be able to take appropriate steps to minimise the impact of medicine shortages on patient care.

The Government was already reviewing the effectiveness of Serious Shortage Protocols (SSPs). Consistent and widespread feedback from our members suggests that SSPs are rarely used and when they are issued, they are bureaucratic, professionally frustrating and inflexible. They are not supporting continuity of care or minimising the burden across the healthcare system as intended. A more pragmatic approach is required.

Medicines legislation should instead be amended to allow pharmacists to use their professional judgement to make minor amendments to prescriptions in the event of a medicine being out of stock, such as: different quantities, strengths, formulations or generic versions of the same medicine.ⁱⁱⁱ This would save patients having to go back to their prescriber and help reduce the workload of GPs. For pharmacists in secondary care these substitutions are standard practice. This already happens in Scotland. It is time to address this imbalance and improve access to medicines by enabling all community pharmacists to make these simple changes.

Yours sincerely,

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ⁱ BBC News: UK post-Brexit drug stockpiles at risk amid virus, 8 June 2020 www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-52959639

ⁱⁱ Government to monitor impact of coronavirus on UK medicine supply, 11 February 2020
www.gov.uk/government/news/government-to-monitor-impact-of-coronavirus-on-uk-medicine-supply

ⁱⁱⁱ Further information: Medicines Shortage Policy www.rpharms.com/recognition/all-our-campaigns/policy-a-z/shortage-policy