



## THE ROLE OF BRANDS IN ENHANCING PRIMARY HEALTHCARE AND EMPOWERING PATIENTS

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### The healthcare system in the UK is dealing with some serious challenges.

With an aging population, more people are living with non-communicable diseases, and with the ongoing fallout from the global COVID-19 pandemic, things are getting tough. The strain on the NHS keeps growing, and **it's crucial to find transformative measures to lighten the load and ease the burden on our resources**, whilst continuing to meet patient's needs.

### On 8th May, Rishi Sunak unveiled a plan aimed at revolutionising primary care in the UK.

The proposed changes seek to alleviate the 8am scramble and long telephone queues of those waiting for appointments by **enhancing access to relevant healthcare services for non-urgent cases and 'freeing up' 15 million GP appointments** for those who need them.

Recognising the importance of patient empowerment, the proposed changes **aim to reshape primary healthcare** by placing greater responsibility in the hands of individuals to support their own health and well-being through self-care initiatives.

Since the pandemic, there has been a noticeable shift towards self-care, and we have witnessed the positive impact it can have on resource capacity. **People are now more likely to seek medical attention from their local pharmacy** before contacting their GP, and this change has been significant.

According to **NHS England** there has been an impressive **83% increase** in the number of **individuals visiting pharmacies for medical attention** between June 2021 and 2022.

By equipping patients with accurate information and tools to manage their health, these changes have the potential to improve outcomes and optimise the utilisation of healthcare services in a sustainable manner. **While these changes hold great promise, there are questions that need to be addressed and considerations for over-the-counter (OTC) and prescription-only medicine (POM) brands during this adjustment.**

## PHARMACY FIRST: Coping with Additional Pressure

The Government's plan aims to ease the burden on GPs, but it raises concerns about whether pharmacies have the resources to handle the extra pressure while fulfilling their current responsibilities.

You see, many community pharmacies usually have only one pharmacist on duty, who is already juggling a range of daily tasks. They conduct health assessments, give vaccinations, monitor blood pressure and diabetes, dispense prescriptions, and offer advice to walk-in patients.

With these existing demands, it becomes clear that the proposed changes present significant challenges, especially given high levels of job dissatisfaction amongst pharmacists.

**A 2022 PSNC survey found that a staggering 81% of respondents had considered leaving their job in the previous year.**

The government's push to expand the Primary Care Network has also led to more professionals leaving community pharmacy. **They are enticed by benefits like a more manageable workload, reduced and flexible hours, and the opportunity to use their skills and knowledge in other roles.**

These findings emphasise the immense stress and difficulties that pharmacists already face in serving their patients. **It's crucial that any changes in primary healthcare consider resolving the shortfall in existing capacity, as well as the well-being and job satisfaction of existing pharmacists to promote their retention.**

## ANTIMICROBIAL RESISTANCE

Growing antimicrobial resistance poses a serious threat to global health systems and socioeconomic infrastructure.

**Currently, drug resistance causes 700,000 deaths annually, but by 2050, this number could rise to a staggering 10 million per year if the trend continues.** Factors like increased accessibility and overuse of antimicrobial medications contribute to emerging resistance.

**Following the COVID-19 pandemic, telephone consultations have been used to reduce face-to-face GP appointments by 50% allowing HCPs to offer treatment to more patients.**

With introduction of remote consultations, changes in prescribing habits have been observed. HCPs are more likely to prescribe medications including antibiotics during these assessments compared with traditional face-to-face appointments. Whilst remote assessments have been deemed safe, it's too early to tell what impact these prescribing trends will have had on emerging resistance.

As pharmacies take on prescribing responsibilities for common conditions, it's crucial to carefully consider each patient's clinical presentation to prevent resistance.

Brands should adapt their tools to support flexible healthcare provision, providing diagnostic tools that highlight important factors during remote assessments and situations where a physical assessment is recommended. **Equipping healthcare professionals with knowledge and training on responsible antibiotic prescribing is vital.**

**A recent study showed that while patients trust GPs, 33% of GPs feel pressured to prescribe antibiotics, especially by elderly patients with pre-existing conditions. Worryingly, only half of the patients in the study knew that antibiotics target bacteria, and 38% didn't fully understand antibiotic resistance.**

**Brands should support prescribers by creating educational tools for patients, such as diagnostic tools and patient-focused case studies, to better equip them for conversations with their primary care providers and build trust in professional decisions.**

## IMPLICATIONS FOR BRANDS & Patient Safety

The expansion of community pharmacy services is expected to introduce heightened competition between OTC and POM brands.

Independent pharmacies, which often face financial difficulties and lack government incentives, may face ethical dilemmas when faced with solutions where business and patient interests conflict. As patients become more familiar with prescription medicines, they may ask for specific drugs based on recommendations from friends or their own previous experiences or research.

In this context, pharmacists play a crucial role in making informed decisions that prioritise their patients' well-being. Striking a balance between patient autonomy and safety requires careful management and effective communication to provide the most appropriate treatment options.

**This new landscape may present challenges not only for HCPs but also for brand teams.**

As a POM brand manager impacted by these changes, **you need to think about the impact on your patient's treatment journey and the new touchpoints you'll need to engage with from a patient and HCP perspective.**

POM brands will need to take an active role as an advocate for the Pharmacy First initiative by showing their support for pharmacy services.

By developing condition awareness tools, brands can educate patients and facilitate the conversations between patients and HCPs. These materials can be used to reassure patients that GP support is still available and at which stages of the condition they would recommend accessing these services.

On the other hand, OTC brands must work hard to maintain their position. **Building affinity between pharmacists and your brand by developing impactful communications, and making sure patients know to ask for your brand by name will be key.** Suitability tools can also help patients identify if your product is suitable for them. Whilst this is not a new challenge for OTC brands, it will be even more crucial as pharmacists become busier.

**As marketing teams, it's important that we prioritise patient safety and ensure our communications are clear and follow best practices. New regulations may be required to act as safeguards, preserving the boundary between OTC and POM. By implementing these measures, we can encourage patient safety and uphold the highest standards of healthcare provision.**

**There's a lot going on within the healthcare market and each brand has different challenges and priorities. We have summarised the most important considerations for brands, following the primary care plan, below:**

The UK healthcare system is stretched, and the primary care plan aims to enhance access to healthcare services for non-urgent cases by empowering self-care to free up GP appointments for those in need. **Brands should consider how they can support patients in understanding self-care to help achieve these ambitions.**

Community pharmacists may struggle with the additional pressure alongside existing demands. **Brands should take the time to understand what pharmacy teams are experiencing and what their needs are.**

As pharmacies take on additional prescribing responsibilities, **brands need to consider tools to support pharmacists and patients to prevent exacerbating issues such as antimicrobial resistance.**

POM and OTC brands adapting to the changing landscape will need to **engage with healthcare providers and patients through effective communication to facilitate consultations and prioritise safe self-care.**

At Brand Champions, we have a wealth of experience with POM and OTC brands, and can help you navigate your brand challenges.

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