



December 20, 2021

Re: An open letter to the Pharmacy Professionals and our patients

Dear Pharmacy Colleagues and those who we care for:

Pharmacists and pharmacy technicians are trusted sources for advice and prescription medications in nearly every community in Washington state. Pharmacy practice has had significant challenges, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, patients have seen occasional unannounced pharmacy closures and longer wait times. I believe it is essential to discuss this further.

Like other health care settings and other industries, pharmacies lack key staff, specifically pharmacy technicians, due to shortages. This challenge is not new and existed before the pandemic. The pandemic has exacerbated staffing issues due to illness, childcare, school closures, and burnout. Pharmacy professionals have answered the public health call to help, but this spreads resources even thinner. Pharmacies have provided unprecedented numbers of COVID vaccines to children and millions of patients seeking boosters in addition to influenza vaccines. Furthermore, pharmacies increase access to testing by providing on-site COVID-19 test collection, monoclonal antibody administration, and many are preparing to support oral antiviral therapy access. If all this wasn't enough, supply chain challenges impact medication supply, resulting in worsening medication shortages that existed before the pandemic.

The inability to recruit and retain skilled professionals is directly affected by a broken payment system. The prescription payment system controlled by middlemen called Pharmacy Benefit Managers (PBMS) no longer rewards safe and personalized care in the pharmacy. They have developed a smoke and mirrors system, broken promises that leave patients paying too much for medications, and pharmacies subsidizing healthcare. The convoluted system often underpays pharmacies, which results in pharmacies being unable to afford adequate staff while controlling costs.

The stress on the pharmacy system saddens and scares me. The reports of depression and suicidality in pharmacy professionals have escalated tremendously. This week I talked to a pharmacist who had worked 14 days straight, and she had no idea when she would get a day off, but she was committed to keeping the pharmacy open. Pharmacy professionals dedicated to ensuring the patients receive the proper medication for the right reason now worry about their ability to care for their patients safely. We need to ensure that we take care of our patients and pharmacy professionals alike.

State and federal government entities must initiate changes necessary to keep patients and pharmacy staff safe. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and our Washington Public Health Departments rely on pharmacy professionals to increase access to care. We need other arms of government also to support this essential role. Washington Medicaid has been underpaying pharmacies an average of \$7 for every prescription dispensed since 2017. It has failed to update its state plan amendment with the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to pay the actual cost of patient care. Tricare, the benefits for our military and their families, is one of the worst payers in pharmacies and further requires pharmacies to subsidize the care of our military. Our members of the military and their families have made tremendous sacrifices, and they deserve better. CMS and Medicare continue to take an outdated and passive approach to

pharmacy practice. Medicare has issued no clear support or directive to Medicare Part D plans to adequately support pharmacies providing life-saving access to COVID-19 antivirals in pharmacies.

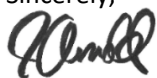
Further, CMS discriminates against pharmacist providers in clinics and pharmacies, not permitting these highly trained professionals to be reimbursed like our other colleagues, such as physicians and nurse practitioners. This has forced health systems and clinics to subsidize the specialized care patients receive by pharmacists, including management of critical illnesses such as diabetes, transplants, cancers, and heart disease. It also means that pharmacists may not be reimbursed for diagnosing and prescribing essential antiviral therapy to tackle the pandemic in each community. CMS needs to urgently make pharmacists “eligible providers” to increase access to care, especially in underserved communities and for our most complex patients. Lastly, we need state and federal regulators’ and legislators’ support to pass laws to regulate predatory and anti-competitive practices of PBMs.

As pharmacy professionals navigate these new and not-so-new challenges, we want to thank patients for their patience and understanding. Please remember to order prescriptions a few days before they run out to give staff time to manage shortages and payment issues. COVID-19 boosters and pediatric vaccines are essential to safe holidays, and pharmacy professionals have been offering many appointments, but the demand is exceedingly high, limiting availability.

The Washington State Pharmacy Association is committed to helping to address these challenges. The WSPA supports on-the-job training programs to help more individuals join our profession, but it is not a quick solution. In addition, we have developed one of the first in the country technician immunization training to increase the number of vaccinators in pharmacies. We have been committed to strong PBM regulations and partnered with the Office of the Insurance Commissioner and legislators in creating meaningful laws. The most impactful will go into effect in January 2022. We have been a leader nationwide in pharmacists billing for patient care to medical insurance plans and have engaged Washington commercial payers in discussions of reimbursement for COVID-19 related services. A better reimbursement model that pays for quality care should directly result in better pharmacy conditions. We offer essential networking and support calls for facets of our profession, and our Academies and SIGS create meaningful tools and training to support their peers. We still have a great deal of work to do but are committed to advocating and supporting all pharmacy professionals.

Lastly, thank you to the outstanding pharmacy professionals in community pharmacies, hospitals, clinics, and long-term care settings. You inspire me every day with your dedication! I see how hard you work to take care of patients and navigate complex systems to keep patients safe. The Washington State Pharmacy Association and our Board of Directors exist to support you in all that you do. Please reach out to us for support; we are here for you. You can email me at [jenny@wsparx.org](mailto:jenny@wsparx.org).

Sincerely,



Jenny Arnold, PharmD, BCPS  
Chief Executive Officer