

Guidance statement on providing care to patients not vaccinated against COVID-19

Some pharmacists have raised concerns regarding whether to, and how to provide services to patients who have not received COVID-19 vaccination. This guidance statement reaffirms that all pharmacists have an obligation to ensure that patients have access to pharmacist services. Pharmacists who are managers and/or owners of pharmacies also have an obligation to provide an environment that maintains the safety of team members and patients.

Council recognises the effort that pharmacists have already exerted to maintain the continuity of valuable services throughout this pandemic. Because these services are so vital, Council also recognises that all members of the public must have continued access to them.

This statement is intended to be read in conjunction with the [Ministry of Health's position statement](#) on the management of unvaccinated individuals in healthcare settings.

Recommended Action Points

- Ensure that team members are aware that **all patients** (vaccinated or not) have a right to quality healthcare and must not be discriminated against
- Read the linked statement from the Ministry of Health
- Develop a policy for assessing and adapting to COVID-19 risk in your workplace.

- A patient must **not** be refused services purely on the basis of them not being vaccinated.
- Services **must be** provided in a manner that protects the safety of team members and patients.

Pharmacists have an obligation to ensure equitable access to high quality, professional services even if the views of the patient are contrary to those of the pharmacist.

The vaccination status of a patient is only one of many factors that should be used to assess the risk of COVID-19 infection and transmission. Other factors to consider include the current rate of community spread, the nature and duration of interaction, and whether the patient is exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms or has recent history of exposure. Though COVID-19 vaccination is highly effective, even a vaccinated patient is still able to become infected with and transmit the SARS-CoV-2 virus asymptotically. Because of this, unvaccinated patients should not have barriers to healthcare implemented indiscriminately without robust evidence of risk. Additionally, unvaccinated patients may be presenting at pharmacies seeking COVID-19 vaccination.

Where there is evidence of heightened risk, pharmacists should employ measures commensurate to the level of risk to maintain their health and safety. Given the range of measures available, Council supports the Ministry's view that circumstances would need to be exceptional to justify refusal of services. Available measures include (but are not limited to), social distancing, hygiene practices, use of full personal protective equipment, and provision of services via telehealth. Should a pharmacist refuse services, they must be prepared to justify their decision with a robust, evidence-based risk assessment. The risk of infection cannot be completely nullified; but nor can it with any pathogen encountered in day-to-day practice.

Where the level of COVID-19 community risk is relevant, this will be made clear by the Ministry of Health. Providers of professional services support can provide advice on what risk mitigating measures are effective and appropriate at any given time. If you have concerns about safety arrangements in your workplace, you should raise these with your employer so that they can be addressed.

Relevant Code of Ethics Principles

- 1A: Fulfils their duty of care to the patient first and foremost.
- 1F: Acts to prevent harm to the patient and the public
- 1C: Exercises compassion and care towards patients and the public in a culturally safe and responsive manner
- 2A: Respects and protects the autonomy, dignity and privacy of patients.
- 2B: Recognises and respects patients' diversity, cultural knowledge and skills, gender, beliefs, values, characteristics and lived experience, and does not discriminate on any grounds.
- 2F: Respects the patient's choice, including the right to refuse treatment, care or advice, or to withdraw consent at any time.
- 3A: Supports the right of all people, to access culturally safe and responsive, high quality professional services.
- 3C: Facilitates timely access to, and promotes equitable use of, healthcare resources.
- 4B: Provides services in an appropriate environment which reflects the character and health-related nature of the profession.

Relevant Competence Standards

- M1.1: Demonstrate personal and professional integrity
- M1.2: Comply with ethical and legal requirements
- M1.4: Practise pharmacy within New Zealand's culturally diverse environment
- M1.6: Make effective decisions
- O4.4: Provide safe working environment