

Leveraging the capacity of pharmacies to improve health outcomes in Vietnam

In the late 1980s, deregulation of the production and sale of pharmaceutical drugs led to an exponential increase in the number of private pharmacies in Vietnam. Today, these pharmacies are often a preferred—and sometimes the only—source of health information and services for many Vietnamese. Although they are under-recognized as key service providers, pharmacists and pharmacy staff have the potential to increase communities' access to appropriate health services and improve health outcomes across the country.

In Vietnam, as in many other developing countries, pharmacists and their staff routinely consult with clients on health issues and dispense many drugs without prescriptions. Unfortunately, many do not have the training or skills to provide accurate information or referral advice, despite government attempts to improve the quality of services. The lack of training, combined with the natural tension that exists between the needs of a small business for sales revenue and the option of providing a referral to another health service provider, means customers do not always get the best health care.

PATH's early work with pharmacies on contraception

PATH has been working in Vietnam to strengthen private pharmacies' capacity to provide high-quality health services since 2003. We work with in-country partners to improve pharmacy practice and better integrate pharmacies into the formal health system.

Helping to make pharmacy practice better meet clients' needs and preferences improves the health of clients, increases trust between clients and pharmacy staff, and increases repeat business.

Our early pharmacy work, implemented in Thanh Hoa province, sought to replicate a model developed by PATH to improve access to reproductive health services by adolescents. PATH partnered with the Provincial Health Services to provide training to pharmacy staff in reproductive health issues and the provision of information to young clients. These trainings were followed by routine supportive supervision visits to ensure the lessons translated into better practice. PATH also produced a range of information materials for pharmacies to display and distribute to clients and facilitated links between



“Appropriately applying the project training has increased the number of customers. I provide health care information more carefully, and customers find they are respected and realize that they have rights as clients. They refer more clients to my pharmacy.”

Pharmacy staff in Khanh Hoa province.

pharmacies and other public and private health workers through a series of joint workshops and working groups. These activities aimed to build trust and understanding between the private sector pharmacists and other health service providers and to encourage pharmacists and their staff to make appropriate client referrals.

During this project, PATH developed a youth-friendly services logo for participating pharmacies to promote their service in the community. PATH partnered with the Thanh Hoa Youth Union to inform youth of the availability of service. Mystery client visits before and after the training workshops showed substantial changes over 12 months in pharmacy staff knowledge, practices related to emergency contraception, and pharmacy utilization by young customers:

- The number of mystery clients who were offered an emergency contraception product in response to an expressed need rose from 84% at baseline to 100% at final evaluation.
- The proportion of clients offered a product who were also given correct use instructions increased dramatically, from 24% at baseline to 90% at final evaluation.
- The average monthly number of visits by customers aged 15-24 years at each participating pharmacy increased from 18 to 45.

Expanding collaboration to influenza and TB/HIV

Donor interest in the program in Thanh Hoa resulted in a request



for PATH to provide technical support to the Provincial Health Services in Hoa Binh province to replicate the activities within the context of a broad reproductive health program for youth. Implementing the pharmacy model in parallel with ongoing programs to strengthen youth-friendly health services significantly increased in the number of young clients receiving appropriate reproductive health information, services, and referrals.

In Tra Vinh province, we developed and tested a model for enhancing the role of pharmacies in preventing and detecting influenza, within the context of avian influenza. Most people with flu symptoms will visit their local pharmacy first, so it was a logical progression to apply the pharmacy capacity-building model to this health issue.

Currently, we are working with partners in Hai Phong province to mobilize private pharmacies in the fight against HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis. Our program is training pharmacists and their staff to identify disease symptoms and refer clients to appropriate counseling and testing centers and health service providers. The program is building trust and strengthening relations between the public and private sectors to increase access to existing HIV and TB case detection, treatment, and prevention services.

Exploring a role for pharmacies in a new client-oriented primary health care model

Recognizing that private pharmacies have the potential to have a greater positive impact on health in Vietnam, PATH has recently begun a project to enhance the role of pharmacies as general community health care providers. This four-year project—being conducted in the provinces of Khanh Hoa, Danang, Thai Nguyen, Vinh Long, and Thua Thien Hue—is developing and implementing a package of interventions to strengthen and improve the informal role of pharmacies in primary health care. The project aims to improve health outcomes among community members by leveraging the private pharmacy sector to enhance the impact of existing primary health care services.

More information

For more information about this work, please visit the PATH website www.path.org or contact vietnam@path.org or info@path.org.

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