



Protecting your patients, protecting yourself

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By this stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, you are probably exhausted. As essential health workers, you didn't have the luxury of staying at home during the lockdown. You're also working under extremely difficult circumstances.

It's really important however to take a reality check every once in a while. Are we doing the right things for our patients and ourselves?

How do other service providers handle protective measures?

During this time, I've needed to see a doctor three times and my physiotherapist many times. (My shoulder is fine now, thanks for asking.)

At each of these visits, obviously the hand sanitiser and wearing of masks were mandatory. What interested me, however, was the meticulous recording of temperatures as you entered. In the case of the physiotherapist, he recorded his own temperature on my chart as well. In fact, even the computer "doctor" to which I took my ailing laptop did that. Retailers such as food stores also measured temperatures, but only one actually recorded it, together with contact details of everyone entering the store.

I was also interested in how each managed social distancing. Most limited the number of shoppers in the store at any time. One supermarket will not let you in unless you take a trolley (after its handle has been sanitised) whether you need it or not – clearly if there's a trolley between you and the next person in the queue, it keeps you apart. But ... it doesn't work well when the aisles are not one-way only. And shoppers lean over you to reach something on a nearby shelf.

The other thing is the management of elderly shoppers. Some stores recognise how vulnerable the elderly are – they make sure that older people do not stand in the queue for long. (I'm so glad I decided to go grey!)

All of which made me start looking at pharmacies.

Fortunately, many pharmacies (if not most) are already doing this. They are implementing the measures discussed above.

Protecting the vulnerable

People older than the age of 60 have been shown to be particularly susceptible to the complications of COVID-19, particularly those who have pre-existing conditions, such as diabetes, hypertension and asthma. No matter their age, people who have HIV and/or tuberculosis are also at risk of severe infection.

Elderly people are vulnerable. Many do not have the luxury of choosing to stay at home during lockdown. There are many families that rely on people over the age of sixty to contribute financially to the home. Some of these people need to go out to work, even during the lockdown. Other elderly people live in families where the breadwinner goes out to work. They may also stay in a family with young children, who need to go to school. Every time someone in the household returns from outside, the older person is exposed to the risk of COVID-19.

Collecting pensions from SASSA (South African Social Security Agency) requires standing in long queues for even longer times. It is estimated that approximately 3.6 million South Africans put themselves at risk when they collect their old age pensions.

These elderly people rely on the public sector for health care, including chronic medication. Sadly, there have been reports that they have been too frightened to go out, so not all these pensioners are currently receiving the care and possibly the medicines they need.

Other vulnerable elderly people are those who have no one to send to buy food and medicines – they are the ones that we see in the queues outside retailers.

Are we doing all we can to protect the elderly?

- Managing the queues – while some consumers are likely to be annoyed, it is important that, when elderly people are seen in queues at pharmacies, they should be assisted to the head of the queue so they can get their medicines and return home as soon as possible.
 - Providing seating – elderly people frequently have difficulty in standing for long periods of times. Ideally, there should be somewhere for them to sit while they are in the queue. Some pharmacies have seats in front of the dispensary. Obviously, social distancing must be applied when people sit here, so at least one but preferably two empty seats for the public should be left between occupied seats.
 - Delivering medicines to patients – ideally, in the private sector it would be logical to deliver medicines to people's homes, rather than have them visit the pharmacy.
 - Show respect and care – as tired and irritable as you are, remember that this is a particularly anxious time for vulnerable people to venture into a pharmacy or other store.
- Remember their chronic conditions – as tempting as it is to feel that the whole world revolves around COVID-19, it doesn't. People still have the chronic conditions they had before lockdown, and perhaps even a few more.

Now, more than ever, elderly patients need us, as pharmacy professionals, to be sensitive to their needs, and to take steps to ensure that our practices do not contribute to their risks.

Further reading

- <https://theconversation.com/our-research-shows-why-its-vital-to-protect-older-south-africans-from-coronavirus-136648>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/older-adults.html>
- <https://www.news.uct.ac.za/campus/communications/updates/covid-19/-article/2020-05-07-we-need-to-protect-the-elderly-in-south-africa-from-covid-19>
- <https://businesstech.co.za/news/trending/406579/people-with-hiv-nearly-three-times-as-likely-to-die-from-coronavirus-new-south-african-data/>