Acceptability of pharmacies serving as primary dispensers of antiviral drugs during an influenza pandemic: Perspectives of pharmacy executives

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Abstract: During a future severe influenza pandemic, as much as 30% of the United States (U.S.) population could become ill and may need prompt treatment with antiviral medicines. Because antivirals are infrequently used for seasonal influenza and are not available in large amounts in supply chains, the federal government has stockpiled caches of antivirals in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Strategic National Stockpile for use during a pandemic.
During the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, numerous antiviral distribution and dispensing challenges arose for state and local public health officials. In May 2011, the CDC launched an effort to explore a new method of antiviral distribution and dispensing during a future pandemic, based on U.S. pharmacies serving as primary dispensers of antiviral drugs. Key informant interviews with pharmacy executives from traditional chain stores, independent pharmacies, as well as pharmacies located in mass merchants and grocery stores were conducted, and the resulting transcripts were analyzed. The purpose of the study was to understand the executives' opinions and views about their pharmacies serving as primary dispensers of antiviral drugs during a future pandemic. Participants were asked about their insights on the relative advantages, risks, compatibility with usual pharmacy processes, and support that might be needed to execute this function successfully.
Overall, every interviewed executive expressed support for this new antiviral distribution method, and most considered their pharmacies as key community stakeholders. Collectively, these executives proposed that if a new way of dispensing antivirals approximates existing pharmacy processes and procedures, it will meet patients' needs and add minimal complexity to pharmacy operations. The informants also identified a number of potential risks but mentioned few "showstoppers" that would cause their pharmacies to not participate with this new method of antiviral distribution and dispensing. Findings from this study can help CDC design a new way of distributing and dispensing antivirals (and potentially other medical countermeasures) in the United States for a future influenza pandemic. By leveraging the skills, systems, and willingness of pharmacies to collaborate in a pandemic response effort, public health officials may realize improved emergency response capability and better population health outcomes.

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