

# Empowering pharmacy students and practising pharmacists to become vaccinators during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond

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Data suggests that patients are as likely to accept an immunisation recommendation from a pharmacist as they are from a physician or a nurse.<sup>1</sup> Pharmacists are generally in an ideal position to recommend immunisation due to the large foot traffic which frequents the pharmacy every day, as it is estimated that 55% of adults frequent a pharmacy at least once a week.<sup>2,3</sup> When pharmacists are added as vaccine providers, this results in increased access and higher rates of adult vaccination.<sup>4-9</sup>

Considering the above, the Division of Clinical Pharmacy at the University of the Witwatersrand set in motion two different plans. One was to develop an immunisation and injection technique course for pharmacists established in practice wanting to immunise patients, both in terms of the EPI and to provide adult vaccinations for diseases such as pneumococcal disease, influenza and COVID-19. This competency course was developed by the academic staff members in the clinical pharmacy division and is already approved through the University of the Witwatersrand. The course meets all the necessary training requirements as stipulated by the South African Pharmacy Council (SAPC). The course is currently being assessed by the South African Pharmacy Council and is awaiting accreditation. On accreditation of the course by the SAPC, participant pharmacists will complete the majority of the course material online and will attend face-to-face training for the practical component, which includes injection techniques and anaphylaxis management. Participant pharmacists will be required to complete a written assessment and an assessment of their injection technique. The post-assessment component of the course includes the administration of intramuscular and subcutaneous injections under the supervision of a nurse, trained pharmacist, PCDT pharmacist or doctor. Participants will submit their completed immunisation record to the University for assessment, after which a certificate of competency will be issued. The certificate can then be used by the participants to apply for a Section 22 A(15) permit that will enable them to provide immunisation and injection services to the community.

The second intervention was to continue the training of the current final year pharmacy students so that they could contribute to the COVID-19 vaccination drive in South Africa. At the University of the Witwatersrand, the final year students already have the underpinning theoretical foundation required from the medical microbiology, clinical pharmacy, pharmaceutical microbiology,

and pharmacy practice courses. A practical component to put the theory into practice was required.

The clinical pharmacy division utilised the existing Screening and Testing Programme for Pharmacy Students (STEPPS) infrastructure. Students had to complete a 4-hour set of online lectures and watch specially developed injection technique videos. After completing this, students then attended 4-hour training sessions, where they first practiced vaccination on task trainers prior to administering normal saline injections intramuscularly to each other in the deltoid, under direct supervision. The students were then required to complete an allergy and anaphylaxis high fidelity simulation. Students who volunteered to be vaccinators, completed the COVID-19 vaccinators training from the Department of Health. The list of student volunteers who completed both the divisional training and the National Department of Health training was submitted and they were subsequently assigned to a vaccination site, where they could work under direct supervision.

The pandemic required a rapid response and the clinical pharmacy division at the University of the Witwatersrand promptly put these measures in place to contribute towards the roll out of the COVID-19 vaccination programme.

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