

Situated in the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Shere Surgery & Dispensary plays an integral role in rural village life for local residents

Facing an intensification in competition from internet pharmacies in recent years, the Partners considered introducing 24-hour medicine collection to enhance convenience and maintain patient loyalty.

The arrival of the pandemic accelerated their decision making and, supported by a community-backed Pharmaself24 campaign, the surgery and residents are experiencing benefits beyond their initial expectations.

The Background

Serving a 45-square-mile catchment area, with no pharmacies nearby, patients rely on Shere Surgery & Dispensary heavily for their medicine needs. Prior to the chaos caused by the arrival of the pandemic, the surgery was under pressure from the home-delivery convenience offered by internet pharmacy competition.

The Partners could see the potential for a loss in prescription business over time, which could impact the overall efficiency of its service and threaten the viability of the Dispensary. Although theoretical, the Partners appreciated that this risk was real and understood the devastating effect it would have on the local population. Should the Dispensary close, there would be no access to immediately required medication, and with elderly patients potentially less able to access online services, they would proportionally experience more loss.



Dr Emma Watts says: “We were trying to get ahead of the trend, protecting the Dispensary for the elderly patients. If they need something at 6:30 in the evening or urgently needed to find the right antibiotics for a urinary infection, there is no pharmacy down the road. We knew if we lost enough dispensing patients, we would lose out altogether as the Dispensary would become non-viable and would have to close.”

The question of slipping demand was flipped on its head in March 2020 when the Coronavirus pandemic hit and the UK entered lockdown. Dispensing volumes jumped almost overnight from 8,000 items per month to around 11,000 and social distancing meant that patients were queuing along the pavement.

The surgery remained open throughout, with two staff members shuttling back and forth between the queueing patients and the Dispensary. Whilst they made the system work, Emma says it was not really fit-for-purpose and the notion of 24-hour medicine collection quickly transformed from an attractive prospect to a sensible decision.

“We could see that nothing was going to change quickly, and the idea of the weather changing and people having to wait outside with nowhere to keep dry just wasn't safe. It pushed us to get ahead of the winter.”



The Pharmaself24 Solution

The decision to choose a Pharmaself24 was a very quick one, says Emma, made easier by the support of the Hub & Spoke Innovations team in ensuring it would be able to fit both with the existing building and within the restrictions of the Conservation Area.

“It was a stand-out product for us, with the size options available and given our population size. We also had a lot of information and help in terms of the installation, so they really inspired us with confidence.”

Funding for the machine was made available by SALV (Shere and Local Villages), a charitable initiative that supports healthcare investments for the benefit of the community. Local residents, frustrated by the difficulties the surgery was facing as a result of the pandemic, eagerly supported the introduction of the Pharmaself24.

From the outside, the design and planning had to incorporate a new ramped pathway for disabled access whilst also taking into account the need for new hedging to reduce light pollution. Strict rules around ambient light levels meant there were safety concerns about use of the machine in darkness, but the ambient glow from the Pharmaself24 machine meant there was sufficient light for safe use by patients at night. The panel for the machine was painted in British Racing Green to ensure it fitted in with both the local environment and the surgery colour scheme, hence Planning Permission was relatively simple.

Inside, significant reconfiguration was required to accommodate the Pharmaself24, with internal doors and the Controlled Drugs cabinet relocated to enable the machine to form part of the new Dispensary area.

The Impact

Prior to the machine going live, the Surgery updated the local community regularly on progress via social media, email updates and notices in the Parish magazine, signing up patients ahead of time so that it would be ready to go from day one. Installation and training passed smoothly and the Pharmaself24 quickly embedded itself as part of the surgery's offering.

Just a month later, there were 56 collections recorded over Christmas and Boxing Day.

"It's been used enthusiastically from the outset," says Emma. "We even had someone in their 90's that was really excited to use it on day one. I'd say uptake has been absolutely brilliant – the patients are happy it's so simple to use."

The Pharmaself24 has now become the default option for collections unless patients choose otherwise. The queue that was previously so difficult to manage, particularly when the surgery was looking to close at 11am on a Saturday, has become much more manageable.

The Conclusion

Where patients require urgent medication following telephone consultation toward the end of the day, pressure is hugely eased through the knowledge the machine can be accessed at any time, even after the building has closed.

Emma says this is particularly beneficial for End-of-Life care, where members of the local community who are supporting a loved one have the reassurance that vital medicine will be easily accessible, even if time restrictions aren't met.

It is this problem-solving ability that has been an unexpected benefit of the Pharmaself24, says Emma. "When you are able to provide patients or carers with a solution – the problem and stress all goes away for them. We knew the machine would provide convenience, but providing urgent medication for collection out of hours was something we hadn't necessarily predicted; it is an incredible addition to the service for our patients. We were nervous about whether investing the money and infrastructure in this project would deliver the benefits we imagined. It has delivered way beyond our hopes and we are proud that we took the leap of faith to innovate."

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Pharmaself24 Automated Prescription-Collection Solution

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