

INFORMATION FOR THE MEDIA

Innovative project by ULS Oeste and ANF produces data to guide Public Health responses

Sentinel pharmacy network ensures epidemiological surveillance of respiratory viruses

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An innovative epidemiological surveillance project, developed in collaboration between the Oeste Local Health Unit (ULS Oeste) and the National Association of Pharmacies (ANF), is producing strategic information to support more effective Public Health responses in the Oeste region, through a network of community pharmacies acting as sentinel units. The epidemiological surveillance system becomes multi-level, integrated, and more robust, transforming the contingency plan into a true system of anticipation and collaboration in health, based on evidence and territorial governance.

Within the scope of this project, community pharmacies in the region have already collected data from more than 1,800 users presenting symptoms of respiratory infection and have supported the performance and recording of the results of more than 300 rapid tests for respiratory viruses. This systematic data collection allows close and representative monitoring of the circulation of respiratory viruses in the community, within the framework of this innovative epidemiological surveillance project.

The initiative is integrated into the Seasonal Health Response Plan – Winter module of ULS Oeste and significantly strengthens the information available for identifying circulating viruses and assessing the burden of disease in the community, supporting the management of health services during a period traditionally marked by high demand from the population and consequent pressure on healthcare capacity. At the same time, it enables the timely and qualified management of mild cases of respiratory infection in the community, contributing to the appropriate use of emergency services and to the concentration of healthcare resources on more severe cases.

In addition to strengthening surveillance during periods of increased circulation of respiratory viruses, the project also has the potential to rapidly detect new infection patterns and thus enable the early identification of new pathogens that could cause epidemics and pandemics at an early stage of their circulation in the community.

Using an innovative methodology resulting from the application of respiratory surveillance guidelines to the community pharmacy context, the project demonstrates the potential to place a large proportion of the population under surveillance within a few weeks, in a rapid and representative manner, while maintaining the quality of the data collected. This approach helps to address the growing challenges and limitations of traditional surveillance systems and follows the recommendations of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and the European Commission to strengthen epidemiological surveillance systems in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period.

Preliminary results, supported by a structured data collection methodology, show a high potential for replication of this model at national level, providing strategic information to support clinical and health service management decisions at both local and national levels, enabling faster, more effective, and evidence-based responses. This makes it possible to optimize on-the-ground responses, such as the phased activation of contingency plans, the reorganization of healthcare and workforce resources, the reinforcement of health communication messages directed at the population, and coordination with primary and hospital care before significant system overload occurs.

Currently, more than 70% of pharmacies in the region are actively participating in the project, covering the municipalities of Bombarral, Cadaval, Caldas da Rainha, Lourinhã, Óbidos, Peniche, Sobral de Monte Agraço, and Torres Vedras. **The Chair of the Board of Directors of ULS Oeste, Elsa Baião, highlights the importance of this “interinstitutional collaboration”, emphasizing pharmacies as “strategic partners due to their proximity to people, the trust of users, and their deep knowledge of the territory”.**

At the local level, with around 60,000 people entering the participating community pharmacies each week, the network ensures high population coverage, enabling close monitoring of the evolution of respiratory virus circulation in the region. **The President of the National Association of Pharmacies, Ema Paulino, notes that “since the beginning of the project, data have already been collected from more than 1,800 users with acute respiratory infection symptoms and more than 300 rapid tests have been carried out”,** further emphasizing “the impact of the initiative in strengthening actions to promote respiratory etiquette, vaccination, and support for the management of non-severe acute symptoms, with the potential to reduce virus transmission and unnecessary visits to hospital emergency departments”.

Participating community pharmacies operate as sentinel units in coordination with the ULS Oeste’s Department of Public Health and Populations. **According to Nuno Rodrigues, coordinator of the department, “the data collected are essential to increase and optimize the capacity of the epidemiological surveillance system, contributing to more effective and better-adjusted responses at any given time”,** complementing monitoring tools such as the HiCorr Index, developed through a previous partnership between this department and ANF, which supports the early detection of epidemic peaks.

Data collection is carried out through an electronic form available in pharmacy software systems, where pharmacists record symptoms and tests performed. This methodology makes it possible to monitor the intensity, temporal patterns of infections, and positivity rates for different respiratory viruses in the community.

For more information please contact:

- Communication Office of ULS Oeste: gab.comunicacao@ulso.min-saude.pt
- National Association of Pharmacies - Marta Roquette | Head of Communications - Tel. 910 239 193