

PHARMACIES AND THE NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE FORMALISE DIRECT REFERRALS FOLLOWING HIV AND HEPATITIS SCREENING

- A protocol between ULS Loures-Odivelas and ANF establishes a direct referral pathway to healthcare services, ensuring continuity of care for people with reactive test results.
- This is the first protocol to establish an integrated, community-based, person-centred care model, linking early detection in pharmacies with confirmatory testing and clinical follow-up within the Portuguese National Health Service (SNS).

People who receive a reactive result from rapid HIV and hepatitis B and C tests conducted at community pharmacies within the catchment area of the Loures-Odivelas Local Health Unit (ULSLOD) will now benefit from a formal referral pathway to the services provided by this healthcare unit.

The model is formalised through a referral protocol between participating community pharmacies and ULSLOD, as part of the project “Bringing Screening Closer to Communities: Expanding Access to HIV, HBV and HCV Screening through Community Pharmacies”, under the FOCUS Programme.

The aim is to reduce barriers that may interrupt the pathway from testing to diagnosis and treatment, thereby lowering the risk of patients being lost to follow-up. To this end, the protocol establishes direct communication channels and clearly defined responsibilities between pharmacies and the healthcare services involved.

Continuity of care is particularly important in HIV and hepatitis B and C screening. Despite the progress made, these infections remain a major public health challenge. Portugal continues to report HIV figures above the European average, with a significant proportion of late diagnoses, while some people remain unaware of their serostatus.

Early detection enables follow-up and, where necessary, treatment to begin sooner, contributing both to better health outcomes and to reducing the transmission of these infections.

Community pharmacies play a particularly important role in this pathway due to their proximity to local communities, extensive geographical coverage, easy access without a prior appointment, and trusted relationships with the public. These characteristics help bring screening closer to

communities and reach people who, for various reasons, have less contact with healthcare services or are less likely to undergo screening.

The FOCUS Programme is being implemented in participating community pharmacies in the municipalities of Amadora, Sintra, Odivelas and Loures and is aimed at people aged over 18. Rapid HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C tests are free of charge and include pre- and post-test counselling. Participation is voluntary and confidential, and testing can be carried out anonymously.

When a reactive result is obtained, the pharmacist provides appropriate counselling and, with the individual's consent, activates the referral pathway established with the healthcare services. A reactive result does not, in itself, constitute a diagnosis, making confirmatory testing and appropriate clinical follow-up essential.

A model with potential for nationwide implementation

The protocol established between ULSLOD and the National Association of Pharmacies (ANF) provides a reference model for coordination between community pharmacies and Portuguese National Health Service (SNS) services. It is designed to be broadly standardised and replicable, enabling phased implementation in other parts of the country.

This collaboration combines the proximity and accessibility of community pharmacies with the healthcare services provided by the SNS, creating the conditions to increase early diagnosis, prevent patients from being lost to follow-up, and promote timely access to healthcare. This coordinated approach can contribute to better health outcomes and strengthen the public health response to HIV and viral hepatitis.

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