

Pharmacies in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area Launch HIV and Hepatitis Screening Under the FOCUS Program

Campaign encourages testing at least once in a lifetime

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Plataforma Saúde em Diálogo, representing several patient associations, and the FOCUS Program, funded by Gilead Sciences, in partnership with the National Association of Pharmacies (ANF), are implementing in Portugal an initiative for screening HIV, hepatitis B (HBV), and hepatitis C (HCV) in community pharmacies, with a focus on reducing late diagnosis.

The initiative is taking place in participating community pharmacies in the municipalities of Amadora, Sintra, Odivelas, and Loures, and is aimed at all adults aged 18 and over. The program is based on the use of rapid, free tests, accompanied by pre and post-test counseling, with protocol-based referral to healthcare services in the event of a reactive result. Participation is voluntary, confidential, and may be carried out anonymously.

An innovative aspect of the project is the collaboration with community-based organizations with field experience, coordinated by Plataforma Saúde em Diálogo. In the case of a reactive result, and with the participant's consent, the pharmacy may contact a dedicated professional from these organizations, a *patient navigator*, who supports the individual throughout their journey within the National Health Service and ensures effective integration into the hospital pathway for diagnostic confirmation and timely initiation of care.

José Luis González, International Director of the FOCUS Program at Gilead Sciences in Portugal and Spain, highlights that «this project reflects an ongoing commitment to eliminating HIV and viral hepatitis infections as public health threats. Expanding community-based screening models is essential to reach populations that might otherwise remain undiagnosed and without timely access to healthcare».

Jaime Melancia, President of Plataforma Saúde em Diálogo, emphasizes that «pharmacies, due to the trust they maintain with communities, are a key point of contact for reaching individuals who might otherwise not undergo these screenings. At the same time, the integration of community-based organizations, through dedicated professionals ensures that each person with a reactive

result who is referred is effectively followed up and integrated into the hospital pathway for diagnostic confirmation and timely initiation of care».

The National Association of Pharmacies also notes that «pharmacies are in a privileged position to actively contribute to public health, given their experience, proximity, and trusted relationship with communities». ANF President Ema Paulino further stresses that this context is essential to overcoming barriers associated with the stigma that still surrounds these infections, ensuring a safe and trustworthy environment throughout the entire process.

Despite the progress made, HIV remains a significant challenge in Portugal. Between 1983 and 2024, more than 66,000 cases of infection were diagnosed, of which around 24,000 progressed to AIDS. Although there has been a reduction in new diagnoses over the past decade, the country still reports figures above the European average, with a particularly high incidence of late diagnosis.

Since 2010, the FOCUS Program has contributed to more than 24.7 million tests worldwide, strengthening public health systems in the United States, Spain, and Portugal through sustainable approaches adapted to local contexts, reinforcing the role of community organizations in the response to HIV and hepatitis, and promoting closer integration between community health and the National Health Service.

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