



“Pharmacy Safe Spaces” Initiative

In honour of Women’s Month 2020, the Independent Community Pharmacy Association (ICPA) has launched the “**Pharmacy Safe Spaces**” campaign.

This initiative aims to assist victims of violence by giving them the option to request assistance from pharmacists who can report and provide linkage to essential counselling, care and support. The Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA) has partnered with the Independent Community Pharmacy Association (ICPA) to support this initiative.

Community pharmacy is ideally placed to support victims of Gender Based Violence (GBV) as the majority of those seeking care as patients or providing care to their families are women. In order to increase access to places within communities where victims of GBV can seek confidential help, 1200 pharmacies within ICPA, have opened their doors to provide free access to our 3500 pharmacists and PsySSA have agreed to provide free virtual counselling to those who cannot afford the service for the next three months during COVID-19 (September-November).

The ICPA network of independent community pharmacies has always been considered a “safe space” for individuals. ICPA pharmacies have been on the frontlines during the COVID-19 pandemic, remaining open for extended trading hours and on weekends making them highly accessible centres of care. Pharmacists and their staff are well positioned to assist victims of violence when they visit the pharmacy seeking medicines for chronic depression and/or pain, items for wound care, sleeping aids, emergency contraception, or PEP (HIV).

The COVID-19 lockdown restrictions have curtailed the movement of people which has contributed to an increase in Gender Based Violence. Individuals who are already in abusive situations, are more exposed to increased control and restrictions by their abusers, with little to no possibility to seek help.

Both once off and patterned visits, of this nature are often red flags that alert us to be vigilant for other possible signs of abuse, such as observable bruises and injuries. These visits create opportunities to provide critical support and, at times, life-saving interventions. The open relationships that community pharmacists have with their patients makes it amenable to broach these painful subjects and safe for the victims of abuse to reach out and ask for help.

The safe spaces initiative is not limited to gender-based violence. Our network is equipped to support and guide people to the relevant authorities or supportive networks, such as virtual psychologist sessions, social workers, animal welfare services or the police, depending on the situation.

“Our network extends across South Africa, from densely populated cities right into deep rural areas. The pharmacy is often the first and, in some cases, only point of healthcare for many South African citizens. The communities we serve have over the years come to identify their community pharmacy as a place of trust, support and immediate help.” Says Jackie Maimin, ICPA CEO.

As we celebrate Women’s Month in South Africa, it is imperative that we speak out and express our outrage and horror against the second pandemic of Gender Based Violence (GBV). We call on Government and on all of South Africa to, in the words of the eloquent Arundhati Roy *“respect strength, never power and above all to never look away”*, because as Elie Wiesel said, *“what hurts the victim most is not the cruelty of the oppressor but the silence of the bystander”*. It is incumbent upon us to do more to protect and empower our women and children.

With this in mind, ICPA has launched the “Pharmacy Safe Spaces” initiative where victims of GBV can access assistance from pharmacists who will provide linkage to essential counselling, care and support.