# UK pharmacy reforms aimed at easing prescription delays and expanding pharmacists' clinical roles



Pharmacy leaders across the UK are urging urgent legislative changes to address significant delays patients face when prescriptions cannot be immediately fulfilled due to stock shortages. Under current rules, pharmacists are not permitted to make substitutions if a prescribed medicine is unavailable, even when safe alternatives exist. This often forces patients to travel between multiple pharmacies or return to their GP to obtain a revised prescription, causing avoidable delays in receiving vital medication.

The National Pharmacy Association (NPA) highlights that these restrictions stem from legislation dating back to 1968, which prohibits pharmacists from altering prescriptions, such as substituting capsules for tablets or providing different dosages. Such constraints have led to patients waiting weeks for essential medicines, a risk to patient safety particularly for those with serious health conditions. According to an NPA poll of 400 pharmacists, 97% reported patients experiencing at least a day's delay while pharmacists requested new prescriptions, and 95% observed instances where patients went without medicine altogether despite pharmacies holding suitable alternatives. One pharmacist shared that patients with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia waited over a week, while another recounted how an eight-year-old with a urinary infection was forced to visit A&E due to the unavailability of a specific antibiotic formulation, despite an alternative being stocked.

Olivier Picard, chairman of the NPA, stressed in a statement the need for urgent reform, remarking that pharmacists, as highly trained medicines experts, are already advising GPs on clinically suitable alternatives. He called the current situation “frustrating” and “dangerous,” emphasising that “it is madness to send someone back to their GP to get a prescription changed” when a safe alternative is available. Picard pointed out the outdated nature of the legislation amid modern medical supply challenges and the expanding clinical role of pharmacists.

The UK government has acknowledged the issue and in August 2023 pledged to consult on measures to grant community pharmacists more flexibility to supply alternative strengths or quantities of medicines without waiting for new prescriptions. A Department of Health and Social Care spokesperson confirmed their awareness of the distress caused by medicine supply disruptions and highlighted upcoming consultations aimed at empowering pharmacists to supply safe alternatives where appropriate.

This push for change complements longstanding calls within pharmacy professional bodies. Back in August 2020, the Royal Pharmaceutical Society advocated for granting pharmacists authority to modify prescriptions to help manage shortages effectively, reduce patient wait times, and ease administrative pressure on GP practices. Their proposals included allowing adjustments to medicine quantities, strengths, and formulations without needing prescriber approval.

Moreover, recent government reforms aim to modernise pharmacy practice beyond substitutions. The 10-Year Health Plan, announced in mid-2025, intends to expand the responsibilities of registered pharmacy technicians, thereby freeing pharmacists to focus more on patient care and clinical services. This initiative follows consultations held from late 2023 into early 2024 seeking to update the Human Medicines Regulations 2012 and the Medicines Act 1968. Proposed changes include authorising pharmacy technicians to supervise and carry out dispensing activities, optimising staff roles to improve efficiency and patient experience.

While these reforms promise improvements, the pharmacy sector remains vigilant about upholding safety and ethical standards. Past incidents, such as a 2013 BBC investigation into illegal sales of addictive drugs by some London pharmacists, have underscored the importance of maintaining rigorous regulatory oversight even as professional autonomy increases.

In addition to prescription modification challenges, other systemic concerns persist around patient medication management. For example, repeated calls have emerged—from places like Guernsey and Telford—to improve repeat prescription systems and reduce uncollected medicines, which contribute to inefficiency and NHS financial losses.

In summary, there is a clear consensus among pharmacy leaders and health authorities that evolving legislation is necessary to meet modern healthcare demands. Enabling pharmacists to dispense safe alternative medicines without cumbersome red tape would alleviate patient delays, reduce GP workload, and reflect the enhanced clinical role pharmacists play today. The government’s forthcoming consultations will be watched closely, as timely action could markedly improve patient safety and access to vital medicines across the UK.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/pharmacy-leaders-urge-action-on-medicine-hold-ups-GWDBS2DFVJJZLPQQ57GSEBIHWI/), [[4]](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/pharmacy-supervision/outcome/pharmacy-supervision-consultation-government-response)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/pharmacy-leaders-urge-action-on-medicine-hold-ups-GWDBS2DFVJJZLPQQ57GSEBIHWI/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/pharmacy-leaders-urge-action-on-medicine-hold-ups-GWDBS2DFVJJZLPQQ57GSEBIHWI/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/pharmacy-leaders-urge-action-on-medicine-hold-ups-GWDBS2DFVJJZLPQQ57GSEBIHWI/), [[4]](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/pharmacy-supervision/outcome/pharmacy-supervision-consultation-government-response)
* Paragraph 5 – [[2]](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/08/06/pharmacists-call-powers-change-prescriptions-reduce-time-wasting/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[3]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pharmacist-time-freed-up-to-treat-patients-more), [[4]](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/pharmacy-supervision/outcome/pharmacy-supervision-consultation-government-response)
* Paragraph 7 – [[5]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-22096218)
* Paragraph 8 – [[6]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn4z07245x9o), [[7]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cgr219r8ny9o)
* Paragraph 9 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/pharmacy-leaders-urge-action-on-medicine-hold-ups-GWDBS2DFVJJZLPQQ57GSEBIHWI/), [[4]](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/pharmacy-supervision/outcome/pharmacy-supervision-consultation-government-response)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/pharmacy-leaders-urge-action-on-medicine-hold-ups-GWDBS2DFVJJZLPQQ57GSEBIHWI/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/08/06/pharmacists-call-powers-change-prescriptions-reduce-time-wasting/> - In August 2020, the Royal Pharmaceutical Society (RPS) advocated for pharmacists to have the authority to modify prescriptions to address medication shortages. The proposal aimed to allow pharmacists to adjust quantities, strengths, and formulations of prescribed medicines without consulting the prescriber, thereby reducing delays and improving patient care. RPS director Robbie Turner highlighted that current regulations hinder pharmacists from providing immediate alternatives, leading to unnecessary patient wait times and administrative burdens. The initiative sought to streamline the dispensing process and enhance the efficiency of community pharmacies.
3. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pharmacist-time-freed-up-to-treat-patients-more> - In July 2025, the UK government announced plans to modernise pharmacy supervision rules as part of the 10-Year Health Plan. The proposed changes aimed to allow registered pharmacy technicians to take on greater responsibilities, enabling pharmacists to focus more on frontline patient care. This initiative sought to improve patient access to pharmacy services by optimising the deployment of pharmacy staff and enhancing the efficiency of community pharmacies, thereby reducing delays in accessing medicines and improving overall patient experience.
4. <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/pharmacy-supervision/outcome/pharmacy-supervision-consultation-government-response> - The UK Department of Health and Social Care conducted a public consultation from December 2023 to February 2024 on proposals to amend the Human Medicines Regulations 2012 and the Medicines Act 1968. The consultation aimed to modernise pharmacy practice by enabling pharmacists to authorise pharmacy technicians to carry out or supervise the preparation, assembly, dispensing, and sale and supply of medicines. The proposed changes sought to optimise the use of pharmacy staff, allowing pharmacists to spend more time delivering clinical services and improving patient care.
5. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-22096218> - In 2013, a BBC investigation uncovered that several London pharmacists were illegally selling addictive drugs without prescriptions. The General Pharmaceutical Council (GPhC) suspended two pharmacists involved in the illicit sales. The investigation highlighted the importance of strict regulations in the pharmaceutical industry to prevent the illegal distribution of controlled substances and protect public health. The GPhC emphasized the need for vigilance and adherence to legal and ethical standards within the pharmacy profession.
6. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn4z07245x9o> - In January 2025, a Guernsey deputy called for changes to the island's repeat prescription system, advocating for a pharmacist-led approach. The current system required patients to see a GP every six months to receive new prescriptions, which was considered inconvenient and costly. The proposed changes aimed to streamline the process, reduce patient burden, and improve access to necessary medications. The Health and Social Care Committee acknowledged the need for further exploration of such changes to benefit patients.
7. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cgr219r8ny9o> - In March 2025, a Telford pharmacist appealed to patients to cancel uncollected prescriptions, highlighting the financial impact on pharmacies. Uncollected prescriptions cost the NHS millions annually, with some pharmacies reporting 200-300 uncollected items each month. The issue led to medicines being kept for extended periods, potentially leading to wastage and financial losses. The pharmacist urged patients to inform pharmacies if they no longer required prescribed medicines to mitigate these challenges.