

# Community pharmacy-led vaccination scheme helped patients overcome hesitancy around COVID-19 jabs

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An award-winning scheme that saw community pharmacists support patients to understand the benefits of being jabbed against COVID-19

and overcome initial hesitancy proved hugely successful, new research by an expert from Kingston University has shown.

The COVID Champion scheme was launched by the NHS South East London Integrated Care System in July last year, at a time when there was high prevalence of the virus in areas of South London as well as low vaccination uptake. During a six-month period, more than 8,500 conversations took place between community [pharmacy](#) professionals and patients as part of the scheme. After discussing their concerns and asking questions they may have had about the vaccine and why it was important, more than 6,000 took up the offer of a jab, including more than 2,000 previously hesitant patients.

The program, run in the boroughs of Bexley, Bromley, Greenwich, Lambeth, Lewisham and Southwark, and its effectiveness have been evaluated by Associate Professor of Pharmacy Practice at Kingston University, Dr. Ricarda Micallef—with her findings published in the journal *Pharmacy*.

Dr. Micallef said the project, which picked up an innovation and best practice award at the NHS's annual PrescQIPP awards, found a lack of understanding of the vaccination was the biggest reason for patients' initial hesitance—while cultural issues and risk of blood clots were also factors. "Many of the people the pharmacy teams spoke to felt they didn't have enough information about the vaccine, couldn't understand how it could be developed in that time-frame and be safe to administer so quickly—there was a lot of skepticism," she said.

The scheme gave [community pharmacists](#) the opportunity to chat to patients about the COVID-19 vaccine while buying over the counter medicine or collecting a prescription from their local pharmacy. This enabled them to identify those who hadn't been vaccinated, to debunk myths and misconceptions, answer any questions they may have and,

with consent, book patients in for their first dose or signpost them to their local walk-in center.

Dr. Micallef said the trust people have in their local pharmacists was key to the success of the scheme. "Around 95% of people in the U.K. can get to a community pharmacy within a 20-minute walk, so they are easily accessible. Because of this a lot of community pharmacists have really good relationships with residents in their area so I think that element of trust between patient and [pharmacist](#) really helped in terms of health messaging," she said.

In addition to the work around increasing COVID-19 vaccine uptake rates, the scheme also saw NHS South East London work with Local Pharmaceutical Committees on a virtual community wellness outreach program to support those most vulnerable in their communities. Pharmacists discussed [self-care](#) and how to improve physical and mental wellness with patients in a bid to reduce health inequalities across South East London.

The recognition for the project—also shortlisted for Health Initiative of the Year at the Chemist and Druggist Awards—highlighted the often unrecognized and undervalued work of pharmacists, Dr. Micallef said. "This innovative and timely scheme really demonstrates the value of trusted relationships between communities and health professionals. It's a fantastic example of the role community pharmacists have to play in health care, with their many wide-ranging skills and knowledge of their patients' needs and concerns that can support ongoing public health initiatives."

**More information:** Ricarda Micallef et al, Description of a Pharmacy COVID Champion Service in South East London to Reduce Vaccine Hesitancy, *Pharmacy* (2022). [DOI: 10.3390/pharmacy10060143](https://doi.org/10.3390/pharmacy10060143)

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