

French pharmacists strike over pay and drug shortages

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French pharmacists began their first walkout in 10 years on Thursday, closing up shop over drug shortages, low regulated prices, pharmacy closures and fears medications could be sold online.

After poster and email campaigns to warn of the closures in recent days, patients found around 90 percent of pharmacies across France closed for the day, with every single one in some regional towns shutting their doors.

Local authorities have requisitioned some locations to ensure a legally required minimum coverage.

Protesters in cities including Toulouse, Nice, Angers and Limoges chanted slogans like "Pharmacies in danger means a threat to health" and "Where's the amoxicillin?" referring to an antibiotic that has suffered repeated shortages.

The USPO pharmacists' union said around 13,000 people had joined morning demonstrations.

Professionals say they are just as concerned about drug shortages, rural closures and training reform as about remuneration and working conditions.

"We are having to pause diabetics' treatment because we're missing one injectable drug," said Isabelle Pailler, a pharmacist of 30 years from Bellac in central France who joined a 400-strong march in Limoges.

"We spend an hour and a half or two hours every day on the phone with doctors, the hospital, the drugmakers" to deal with the problem, she said.

For the profession as a whole, "the biggest worry is vanishing pharmacies" as they face economic hardship in rural areas and sometimes even in towns and cities, said Philippe Besset, president of the FSPF pharmacists' union federation.

Around 2,000 pharmacies have closed nationwide in 10 years, leaving

around 20,000 in operation, trade bodies say.

Unions are calling for higher remuneration from next year as inflation blows up their costs, ahead of talks next week with France's national health insurance authority.

Pharmacists claim that drug prices in France, which are set by the government, are lower than in neighboring countries, which has contributed to shortages.

Beyond the walkouts and nationwide protests, a central march in Paris will run through the capital's south from the pharmacy school to the economy ministry.

A major sore point concerns suspected government plans to make it easier to sell over-the-counter medications online.

"All the ingredients are in place to kill the network" of pharmacies across France, which employ a total of 130,000 people, said USPO union chief Pierre-Olivier Variot.

Marc Ferracci, an MP for President Emmanuel Macron's centrist Renaissance party, told AFP that easier online sales were "under consideration" but that people should "keep their heads".

The government would not endanger pharmacists' drug monopoly, he insisted.

"Nothing will be opened up to big supermarkets nor will medications be added to Amazon," Ferracci said.

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