

LETTER TO EDITOR

One counter, many risks: The public health challenge of unregulated pharmacies in districts of Punjab, Pakistan.

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Article Citation: Ali A, Hassnain S. One counter, many risks: The public health challenge of unregulated pharmacies in districts of Punjab, Pakistan. *Professional Med J* 2026; 33(07):1145-1146. <https://doi.org/10.29309/TPMJ/2026.33.07.10782>

Dear Editor,

Since the Punjab Drug Rules of 2007 came into force, the country has been grappling with poor regulatory control.¹ Pharmacies are an integral part of the health care delivery system. Partial compliance with accepted laws in pharmaceutical practice is putting human lives at risk. A survey on pharmacies in the Sheikhpura region of Punjab, including Sheikhpura, Kasur, and Nankana Sahib districts, highlighted many issues of concern.

A cross-sectional survey of 275 pharmacies was conducted in Sheikhpura, Kasur, and Nankana Sahib districts between June 2025 and March 2026 using a structured assessment checklist. Out of the total, 94.6% (260) had valid licences, while 5.4% (15) were operating without valid licences. Considering the region to be one of the central and more developed areas of Punjab, this figure of 5.4% of pharmacies operating illegally was unanticipated. Far more concerning was the fact that only 29.8% (82) of the pharmacies had a pharmacist present. A temperature-control system, a basic requirement for proper storage of many pharmaceuticals, was present in only 82.5% (221) of the pharmacies. Standards of hygiene and cleanliness were suboptimal in a considerable proportion of pharmacies. Merely 32.7% (90) of the pharmacies had proper record-keeping of medicines dispensed and stocks. In a country where antibiotic resistance is rising², and self-medication is a problem to be dealt with³, only 31.3% (86) dispensed prescription-only medicines exclusively against valid prescriptions.

The adoption of digital inventory and dispensing systems may facilitate regulatory monitoring and improve compliance. There is a need for rigorous enforcement of laws, heavy fines, and appropriate punishments to ensure compliance with the Punjab Drug Rules of 2007. If the rules are continually violated, it represents a grave threat to the health of the public and a concern for patient safety in Pakistan.

The findings suggest substantial gaps in compliance with pharmacy regulations in the surveyed districts. Continued non-compliance with regulatory standards may adversely affect medication safety and contribute to inappropriate medicine use. These deficiencies may contribute, unsafe dispensing practices, and the growing challenge of antimicrobial resistance in Pakistan. Strengthening regulatory oversight, ensuring pharmacist availability, and improving monitoring mechanisms should be prioritized to safeguard patient safety and promote rational use of medicines.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

SOURCE OF FUNDING

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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Article received on:

01/04/2026

Accepted for publication:

06/06/2026



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AUTHORSHIP AND CONTRIBUTION DECLARATION

1	Asma Ali: Writing.
2	Shamaila Hassnain: Proof reading.