


# Swiss Armed Forces deployment during the COVID-19 pandemic: militia pharmacy officers' roles and duties

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From 6 March to 30 June 2020, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Swiss government has mobilised several conscript (militia) formations of the Swiss Armed Forces to assist the cantons (states) with healthcare, logistics and security in the fight against SARS-CoV-2. With 5000 members of the military, mostly from the medical troops, it was the largest mobilisation since the Second World War.<sup>1</sup>

During the first pandemic wave, four hospital battalions were mainly dispatched in support of civilian hospitals and nursing homes and a medical logistic battalion was primarily assisting the Swiss Armed Forces Pharmacy. The professional collaborators of this central pharmacy, including full-time pharmacists, were mainly involved in the supply of therapeutic products for the troops deployed (medical material; supply class VIII) and in the building of large stocks of personal protection equipment, similar to other armies.<sup>2</sup>

The enlistment of civilian pharmacists in the Medical Service of the Swiss Armed Forces as militia officers (ie, reserve officers) is long-standing, but their roles and duties are little studied in the literature.<sup>3,4</sup> In Spring 2020, 10 militia pharmacy officers were enlisted in two out of the four

hospital battalions deployed, as well as in the medical logistic battalion and in the staff of the logistic brigade that embedded them all. Their missions were mainly to plan, conduct and control the medical logistics, hygiene and drug manufacturing activities.

In the hospital battalions, the pharmacists especially managed:

- ▶ supply of medical material dedicated to mission-related training of soldiers (7 pallets/battalion), to civilian health facilities assistance (15 pallets/battalion) and to medical transportation (1 pallet/battalion);
- ▶ establishment and application of hygiene procedures to reduce contamination risk of military personnel (as member of the hygiene commission);
- ▶ provision of 40 conscripts own medication at time of personal counselling (in one of the battalion).

In the medical logistic battalion, the support of both military and civilian pharmaceutical production facilities was the most important activity of pharmacists and soldiers. In the military facility, 42 000 L of hand/surface disinfectants were especially produced. In the supported civilian pharmaceutical industry, a 25% increase of the overall production for civilian hospital clients was provided (eg, 40 000 pieces of anaesthetic drugs, such as midazolam, and 310 000 L of infusion solutions).

Thanks to their civilian and military background, militia pharmacy officers have been quickly and effectively deployed throughout the country. The role of pharmacists within their respective battalions has emerged as especially crucial in the pandemic context and the performed missions were sometimes beyond their traditional duties. Their official roles should be further developed, as well as

their basic and practical training, in conjunction with their functions in the armies of other countries. This would be of particular importance for any other major health crisis requiring the mobilisation of the army, including possible subsequent COVID-19 waves.

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