Dear Editor,

Despite tangible improvements over the past 20 years, Afghanistan has one of the world’s most fragile healthcare systems. The country is still unable to provide high-quality health services to its citizens due to low level of capacity, lack of facility and funding [1]. Afghanistan’s pharmaceutical profile is embedded in the Ministry of Public Health, which constantly overviews the pharmaceutical industry. With the cluster of problems plighting the ministry, the strict surveillance in the pharmaceutical industry has become a difficult task, thus rendering numerous problems for the country [2]. The country depends on the neighboring countries most of the times when it comes to importing drugs. In some cases, the drug importation is done through illegal ways because of the country’s unrestricted and porous borders. With the onset of COVID-19, the situation of the pharmaceutical industry deteriorated [3].

In Afghanistan, the mainstream of the pharmacy education has gone through aisles of problems. The education is not standardized except for some universities. The number of pharmacy schools to train high caliber pharmacists are rare [4]. Instead, some private universities have come a long the way, providing pharmacy education with minimum standards. This has induced a terrible repercussion on pharmacy education. Many graduates of such universities have depicted a wrong picture of pharmacy.

Afghanistan’s pharmaceutical industry has become a victim of illegal and free market. In most cases, the rationale behind the illegality of drugs, is a lack of strict policies, a lack of proper regulatory system, a lack of access to sufficient and quality drugs, and the problem with licensing pharmacies in the government [2]. 40% of the drugs are imported through illegal channels, making the pharmaceutical sector the most vulnerable. Many unauthorized pharmaceutical companies are importing low-quality drugs. Low-quality medicine has ramped up the resistance to many diseases and has also escalated mistrust among people in the pharmaceutical industry [5].

Another issue in this area is low level of domestic production of drugs, which is a big challenge showing a lack of investment in the drug market and how enormously the country depends on other countries. Several factors are associated with this issue-lack of professional human resources, inadequate training of professionals, lack of industrial parks, lack of access to medicinal raw materials inside and high tariffs on imported raw materials, and lack of quality control [2]. The Ministry of Public Health’s Quality Control Laboratory is unable to test all drugs for technical problems. In the same vein, the lack of standard laboratory settings is another major challenge [6]. This has increased the availability of low-quality drugs in the country.

Furthermore, the geographical barriers in Afghanistan are deemed to be formidable barriers. In most rural areas, where government outreach is challenging due to conflict, access to pharmacy and formal drugs is deterred. This has resulted in the emergence of traditional medicine as people are forced to seek treatment. Hence, people in far-reached areas trust traditional medicine more than quality and standardized drugs [7]. High rate of illiteracy which is high in rural areas, has contributed to this issue substantially. Due to low level of literacy and awareness, people do not trust healthcare interventions by the government [8].

With the COVID-19 pandemic looming [9], the country faced an immense shortage of oxygen, drugs, and medicine [10]. At the beginning of the pandemic, the World Health Organization helped the country with essential medical supplies with a net worth of 1.6 million $ [11]. During the peak of the pandemic, the prices of essential drugs surged dramatically in the market due to closure of borders. Amid the second wave of COVID-19, the need has become intense, as the country has started to reinforce the battle against COVID-19 [12]. The lack of essential medical supplies has affected the health care system.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Afghanistan’s pharmaceutical industry was already facing many challenges. The country’s geographical landscape and the long-term war have hampered the utilization and access to quality medicine. Access to quality medicine has been a challenge for a long time now; and woefully, the pandemic has worsened the situation. Presumably, what has plighted the pharmaceutical industry would continue to afflict the sector in the post-pandemic. Therefore, a new policy framework is needed to ensure the proper regulation of drug importation and quality, strict surveillance on pharmaceutical industries, and access to medicinal raw materials to help the pharmaceutical industry operate better and address the needs of patients.
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Declaration of competing interest

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