Expanding the Role of Pharmacy Technicians

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Introduction

Pharmacy practice is evolving in complexity, and pharmacy technicians are evolving with it. You will find pharmacy technicians working in numerous practice settings, including community pharmacies, long-term care centers, hospitals, correctional facilities, and educational programs. The roles we assume as pharmacy technicians have evolved to support pharmacists with the technical responsibilities of prescription dispensing, and include order entry, labeling, compounding, order verification, record keeping, billing prescription drug insurance, inventory control, and device training. In clinical settings across the country, pharmacy technicians can be found completing a Best Possible Medication History (BPMH), triaging patients in need of clinical pharmacy services, and assisting with seamless care and discharge planning.

In 2010, we saw provinces begin to regulate and register pharmacy technicians. Across the country, pharmacy technicians have been hard at work meeting the requirements for registration with their provincial licensing authorities. While only British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario and Nova Scotia are currently registering technicians, in early 2013 it was estimated that 1,428 pharmacy technicians were registered (1). Other provinces have started to follow suit, and this number will continue to rise.

Knowledge and Skill Requirements

I started my career in pharmacy in 2002 entirely by accident. I applied for a job as a cashier at a downtown pharmacy while attending college in Prince George, British Columbia. After working as a cashier for a month, the pharmacy technician approached me and asked if I would be interested in covering some shifts for her in the pharmacy. I was offered on the job training and I could freely refer to myself as an assistant or technician. It took less than a year for me to decide that I wanted to work in a pharmacy full time. I applied to a college that offered a pharmacy technician diploma and graduated one year later ready to embark on my new career. After starting my first pharmacy job out of college with a community pharmacy in Edmonton, Alberta, I quickly learned that despite spending thousands of dollars and studying hard, my education had some gaps. While I was familiar with brand and generic drug names, I was unsure of drug classifications. I was able to pull the correct medication from the shelf, and label it, however I did not know which auxiliary labels to apply. I was able to unpack and put away our orders when they arrived from the warehouse, but I didn’t understand the inventory process overall. Over time I was able to fill the gaps in, and work experience, supportive and informative co-workers, and independent study were all instrumental in my development.

While I am not the first technician to get their start this way, I am one of the last. My journey into the profession was a much different path than prospective pharmacy technicians will take today. Today technicians graduate from colleges which offer Canadian Council for Accreditation of Pharmacy Programs (CCAPP) accredited diploma programs. A benefit of standardized pharmacy technician diploma programs is that the students graduating are able to meet national standards for entry to practice (2). The gaps in education that I struggled with are no longer an issue for today’s graduates. For example, accredited pharmacy technician programs offer a comprehensive study of pharmacology, ensuring that technicians know more than just the names of medications. Students are taught the classifications, therapeutic uses and effects of drugs. Pharmacy technicians also graduate with an understanding of pharmacy operations by studying purchasing, inventory management, and merchandising. These are valuable tools that a pharmacy technician will use throughout their career.

Students also gain work experience during rotations in community and hospital pharmacies. New graduates build on this experience by completing a Structured Practical Training (SPT) program, the purpose of which is to ensure new graduates have an opportunity to develop and demonstrate the competencies outlined in the National Association of Pharmacy Regulatory Authorities (NAPRA) Professional Competencies for Canadian Pharmacy Technicians at Entry to Practice.

As a pharmacy technician who was already practicing when the new regulations came into effect, I was able to take online bridging programs to prepare myself for the changes that were taking place. The National Pharmacy Technician Education Bridging Program supplements a practicing technician’s knowledge and skill set, allowing them to prepare for both the Pharmacy Examining Board of Canada
(PEBC) Pharmacy Technician Qualifying Examination, and for the responsibility of an expanded scope of practice. This program is only available to educational institutions that offer a pharmacy technician program which is fully accredited by CCAPP. The time I spent meeting bridging requirements was bookended by PEBC exams. Prior to taking any bridging programs I took the PEBC Pharmacy Technician Evaluating Examination. This multiple choice exam is designed to assess whether a practicing pharmacy technician’s knowledge and skills are comparable to a pharmacy technician graduating from a CCAPP Pharmacy Technician Diploma Program (3).

Having successfully passed the PEBC Evaluating Examination and with all of my bridging program requirements completed, I felt prepared to take the PEBC Pharmacy Technician Qualifying Examination. A practicing technician who has completed 2000 hours of work experience, who has passed the PEBC Evaluating Examination, and who has successfully completed all four bridging programs, is eligible to take this exam. Students who are graduating from a CCAPP accredited Pharmacy Technician Program are also eligible to take the PEBC Qualifying Exam. The exam consists of both a multiple choice exam and an Objective Structured Performance Examination (OSPE). Questions in the exam are based on NAPRA Competencies for Pharmacy Technicians at Entry to Practice (3).

Expanded Scope

In Alberta, under the Health Professions Act (HPA) “Pharmacy Technician” is a protected title. Through the regulation of pharmacy technicians the public can be assured that they are being served by qualified health professionals when accessing pharmacy services (4). With standardized educational requirements and licensing, pharmacies can have confidence in the technicians they employ. This is a key component that allows pharmacists to expand their clinical role in communities and hospitals across Canada. By trusting technicians to competently take over many of the daily dispensing duties, pharmacists can focus on clinical duties, such as immunizing, prescribing, and in-depth medication management.

A technician’s scope of practice is now clearly defined by each registering provinces’ regulatory body. Although the activities permitted may vary provincially, all pharmacy technicians are required to adhere to standards of practice. Pharmacy technicians are responsible for their own actions and are accountable to the public. In hospital and community pharmacies we are starting to see the effects that an expanded scope of practice can have on how roles and duties are managed in and out of the dispensary.

Since the expanded scope of practice has come into effect, I have experienced positive changes in my own practice. I work in a correctional facility where the majority of dispensing duties are performed by pharmacy assistants and technicians. A pharmacist is always on hand to assess prescriptions for therapeutic appropriateness and to help with any questions or issues that arise. I know that our pharmacy assistants and pharmacy technicians take pride in dispensing medication to our patients accurately and in a timely manner. I enjoy the opportunity to work more closely with patients and other members of the healthcare team when obtaining a BPMH. The professional relationships I have started to build have provided learning opportunities, new perspectives, and access to expanded resources for our patients.

Patients can benefit from pharmacists and pharmacy technicians working together to obtain favorable drug therapy outcomes. By having pharmacy technicians perform technical duties related to product preparation and distribution, inventory management, and acquisition of patient information for pharmacist review, pharmacists are free to concentrate on the clinical responsibilities of direct patient care. Pharmacy technicians are able to take on duties outside of the dispensary as well; obtaining a BPMH, or assisting with the seamless care and discharge of a patient, are just two examples.

Collaboration between Pharmacists and Pharmacy Technicians

Our skills and abilities are not innate and unchangeable. Instead, they are developed with effort and practice. All pharmacy professionals have a common goal: to enhance our patient’s overall well-being and health by providing safe and effective medications for appropriate use. To achieve this goal, pharmacists and pharmacy technicians must develop strong working relationships built on mutual respect and trust.

Pharmacy technicians who are taking on new roles and responsibilities will need support and feedback from the pharmacists they work with. Likewise, as pharmacy technicians we need to show pharmacists that we understand the magnitude of responsibility we are taking on, and build trust with healthcare colleagues through open communication and by demonstrating professional and ethical behavior.

The regulation of pharmacy technicians is giving pharmacists a new opportunity for leadership and a new way to facilitate productive working relationships between themselves and technicians. Although I cannot speak to how individual practice settings should manage workflow to best integrate the practices of pharmacy technicians and pharmacists, I do believe that if we all practice effective teamwork, regulated pharmacy technicians can be a valuable resource for pharmacists; and to this end, communication is key. Currently I am taking part in a Clinical Support Technician Exploration Project, and as part of this project I participate in regular
discussions with management and pharmacists about how to best utilize registered pharmacy technicians. We began by asking “Are there currently gaps in service that a technician could fill? Is it possible to improve patient care by shifting some of the roles and workflow?”

Once I began taking on new responsibilities, the open communication between myself, management and pharmacists continued. I found that by communicating with the pharmacists about the goals and needs of specific patients, we have been able to eliminate the duplication of work, and use our respective strengths to our advantage. For instance, while gathering a patient’s medication history and lab results patients may indicate to me concerns they have with their medications, or roadblocks that hinder taking the medication as directed. I can take this information back to the pharmacist for discussion, and when the pharmacist goes to perform an assessment they will have a better clinical picture to start with. The pharmacist may request my help with flagging patients’ lab results, or follow up with a community pharmacy or clinic to facilitate a seamless transition out of our facility.

Many pharmacists were initially hesitant to take on an expanded role, and many physicians were hesitant to as well. Similarly, many pharmacy technicians may be hesitant to assume an expanded scope of practice, and pharmacists may have their own reservations. To enhance everyone’s comfort level and confidence with these new roles it is beneficial for pharmacists and technicians to work together closely. One way that this can be achieved is by shadowing one another in the new roles to gain a better understanding of what support the other needs, and what strengths and limitations each discipline is bringing to the table. It is also important to talk regularly about what is working and what you may have concerns with, to take advantage of learning opportunities when they arise, and to ask for feedback from your patients as well. By working together we can create positive working environments while ensuring that our patients are receiving the best possible care.

References

