

Evolutions in Pharmacy Practice Welcome Change and Further Contemplation of Pharmacy Technician Roles and Supervision

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Results of recent studies and systematic reviews paint an optimistic future for the roles of pharmacy personnel in elevating practice. One review on technicians' involvement with medication therapy management (MTM) saw significant integration into medication reconciliation, documentation, and medication therapy review procedures.⁽¹⁾ This has come on the heels of promising international studies indicating that advanced roles for technicians, such as technician-enhanced verification (aka, "tech-check-tech"), can result in at least as safe, if not safer, medication dispensing in community and hospital settings alike.⁽²⁾ Having technicians more involved in such activities creates even more opportunities for pharmacists to initiate new services, expand in number and scope the existing services offered, and spend more time with patients.⁽²⁾ However, another recent study concluded that participation of technicians in a pilot MTM program was lower than anticipated, owing to shortcomings in its training/orientation and other organizational factors that impeded optimal implementation.⁽³⁾ This is in spite of that same study pointing toward greater job satisfaction of pharmacy personnel and technicians, specifically pointing out new opportunities for pharmacist participation in MTM services. In a separate review, Mattingly and Mattingly concluded that while the literature supports technicians performing advanced roles, the benefits to the technician were primarily indirect, such as a more desirable work schedule.⁽⁴⁾ They inferred that inclusion of more tangible organizational benefits may inspire even greater levels of participation.

These are a few of many instances of training and organizational culture issues now being recognized as among the most important factors in advancing pharmacy and patient care. Organizational culture was implicated as the primary driver of pharmacists' provision of advanced services once legal barriers were removed.⁽⁵⁾ An examination of pharmacy technician work specifically through an organizational behavior lens found four overarching themes: (1) career impetus, as technicians entered the field through a desire to help others, and a large number of them were directly recruited by pharmacists; (2) job responsibilities, wherein technicians desired greater participation in "higher" roles and were viewed as the "face" of pharmacy in the community setting; (3) quality of work life presenting an increasingly favorable career for technicians striving to achieve self-actualization; and (4) equitable partnership for technicians who see pharmacists treating them as valuable colleagues but employing organizations viewing them as highly replaceable.⁽⁶⁾

Indeed, the lack of standardization for pharmacy technician education and entry into the workplace has long been questioned but has recently come under increased scrutiny. A more formal evaluation found that there is relatively little control of technician training by the profession and that the quality of training programs in terms of student outcomes is unknown, necessitating the need for more rigorous discussion about the

future of pharmacy technician roles and the training required for those roles.⁽⁷⁾ Another study demonstrated the value of a technician's primary training, regardless of whether it was on the job, through an accredited vocational program, and/or through certification.⁽⁸⁾ Furthermore, a higher perceived value of training was associated with higher levels of job satisfaction and commitment to remain in the field. However, there were a number of technicians unable to discern whether their training programs were accredited, and there were significant differences in self-assessments of preparation and in quality of work life between hospital and community pharmacy settings. Technicians were not said to expect precipitous raises but did indicate that, at some point, low pay was going to have to be reconciled with shifts in responsibilities, with relatively few organizations having enacted career laddering, mentoring, and other types of support structures that could minimize turnover and improve organizational effectiveness.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that there have been momentous strides in moving the profession and its constituent actors forward but that there is still much unrealized potential. Pharmacists, pharmacy technicians, employers, and regulators all have a role to play in leveraging the strengths of pharmacist support workforce cadres, particularly technicians. With encouraging results regarding pharmacists as supervisors, technicians can take even greater leadership roles. Pharmacy practice will continue to evolve whether or not technicians' new roles are embraced; however, the infiltration of pay-for-performance systems, along with initiatives to implement any of a number of company-wide policies and programs, should expedite these new roles. Pharmacists can continue to help with recruiting and hiring prospective and experienced technicians who will facilitate success and, once hired, can serve as technician champions and advocates who empower these technicians to excel rather than casting doubt on hopeful initiatives as a result of their own fears and insecurities.⁽⁹⁾

Technicians striving toward self-actualization can continue to seek development opportunities. Self-awareness and self-development among practicing constituents are among the leading factors that distinguish a profession from a mere occupation. Even if employing organizations do not provide self-development opportunities for support staff, technicians should still take the opportunity to hone their craft and also reflect on how to improve their "soft" skills of leadership, time management, stress management, empathy, and service. That being said, employing organizations should indeed afford every opportunity for such development by all of their employees and create a vibrant culture rewarding effectiveness and recognizing technicians for their contributions with fair pay, diverse organizational awards, mentoring, and career-laddering mechanisms.

Regulators can also do their parts. State boards of pharmacy have been active in proffering advanced practice designations, examining ideal pharmacist-to-technician ratios, and expanding scopes of practice. Idaho's board has been among the leaders in legislating new roles for pharmacy technicians.⁽¹⁰⁾ Its approach has been to get out of the way of practice changes, with the realization that having the practice of support staff "deregulated" actually creates more autonomy for the pharmacist to design the practice as he or she sees fit. The Idaho approach would appear beneficial, as initial evidence from a pilot project to include technicians in an immunization program has been quite successful.⁽¹¹⁾

If pharmacists, employers, technicians, educators, and regulators are on the same page, the role of pharmacy technicians will continue to be maximized, not only for their benefit but for the benefit of the profession and the patients we serve.

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