Making the Most of Pharmacy Technicians

TECHNICIANS TO THE RESCUE?

Almost half the pharmacies in Canada hired technicians in 2000, and the biggest reason was to free pharmacists’ time for patient care. Are you making the most of your pharmacy technicians? We asked a number of leaders in this area for their suggestions on building the best technician support staff. They also highlight some of the obstacles that still stand in the way.

DISPENSING AND SO MUCH MORE

“From the dispensing of medications to creating the store’s web page, there are dozens of ways your technician can assist you. One of the fundamental ways to use a technician is to let him or her relieve staff pharmacists from all the dispensary’s technical functions, including third party billing and inventory control. To identify such tasks, do a work flow analysis identifying each step in the dispensing process. Then, following Ontario College of Pharmacists guidelines, decide which tasks require a pharmacist and which can be assigned to your technician.

“Next, determine if your technician has the required skills to take on these responsibilities or if additional training is required. Once your technician is successfully fulfilling every technical function involved in the dispensing process he or she can take on additional responsibilities such as preparing head office reports or scheduling staff.

“However, there are many barriers to making the best use of your technician - an obvious one being staffing. An insufficient number of technicians and/or technicians who are poorly trained often leave the pharmacist doing technical tasks, thus providing little time for quality patient interaction.”

Margaret Woodruff, BSc.Phm., MBA,
Professor, Pharmacy Technician Program,
Humber College of Applied Arts and Technology,
Toronto, Ontario

REMOVE ATTITUDE BARRIER

“Some pharmacists may not be making full use of a technician’s skills because of territorial attitudes. This attitude has changed for the better in the last few years, but some pharmacists still prefer to perform the drug distribution function of the job in addition to patient consultation and pharmaceutical care. These pharmacists want to retain full responsibility for all tasks in the pharmacy. Part of that has to do with job protection and part of that is a liability issue - usually territorial feelings and liability go hand-in-hand.

“A little bit of that thinking has to be let go and some kind of procedure put in place specific to each community pharmacy worksite. It should list what will be the pharmacist’s responsibility and what will be the responsibility of the technician. This procedure should encourage the two to help each other rather than say the technician can’t do something because if he or she
makes a mistake the pharmacist is responsible. As pharmacists we must have confidence in our technicians so we can make the best use of our time.”

**Bonnie Meier, B.S.P.,**
Program Head, Pharmacy Technician Program,
Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology,
Kelsey Campus, Saskatoon, SK

**ENCOURAGE SPECIALIZATION**

“Every person has a skill that sets him or her apart from the rest. Help your technician identify his or her special skill and then encourage the utilisation of that skill to its full potential. ‘Create’ a new job description to match your technician’s strengths.

“Why not have a technician as inventory manager? Drug ordering isn’t a therapeutic issue, so there is no logical reason to have a pharmacist performing that task. It will be necessary for you set guidelines and protocols for ordering to ensure your business receives the best discounts, payments terms and maintains sufficient quantities between order shipments, etc., but setting those protocols in place won’t be difficult. In one fell swoop you will free time for your pharmacist(s) to provide pharmaceutical care while encouraging the professional development of your technician.

“This is but one example. There are many areas in which a technician can specialise. From orthotics fittings to blood glucose monitor training to dispensary management, the sky truly is the limit.”

**Tim Fleming,**
President, Canadian Association of Pharmacy Technicians,
Niagara, Ontario

**CERTIFICATION, CE RAISE THE BAR**

“Certification is a mechanism to assess the knowledge and skills of the pharmacy technician and it brings a recognized standard of technical support to the pharmacy field. This is advantageous for employers in terms of recruitment, training and retention because they will be hiring technicians who have already demonstrated they have mastered a basic core of knowledge relevant to the work.

“The Certified Pharmacy Technician credential aims to benefit employers, pharmacists, pharmacy technicians, and most importantly, patients by allowing technicians to perform the dispensing and clerical tasks they are trained to do. Pharmacists can then perform the profile review, monitoring, counselling, and other essential elements of pharmaceutical care.

“The biggest challenge in all of this, of course, is money. Technicians need to start being paid their worth. It’s unreasonable to ask a technician to work to high standards, and pay them a smaller wage than the cashier on the till.”

**Bonnie Gardner,**
Managing Director,
Pharmacy Technician Certification Board,
Edmonton, Alberta

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