LETTERS

The Pharmacy Technician's Role in Pharmacy Student Education

To the Editor: To date, the literature is lacking considerably in the area of technician involvement in pharmacy student education. With increasing focus on the experiential component of pharmacy student education, it is inevitable that student pharmacists will have significant interaction with technicians during multiple periods of their training. Although it is ultimately the responsibility of the pharmacist educator to provide the student with adequate opportunities for growth and development, the nature of the practice of pharmacy dictates that technicians will have an impact on the student's practice-based experience.

The typical introductory pharmacy practice experience (IPPE) presents numerous scenarios for potential student-teaching by pharmacy technicians. The degree of mastery of activities such as processing, dispensing, and billing is likely to be influenced by the types of interactions between student pharmacists and technicians. Therefore, the level of training and motivation of the technician deserve attention from all parties invested in the quality of pharmacy student training. As students are paired with technicians to gain experience in the intravenous (IV) room or at the filling station, consideration must be given to the technician's attitude toward teaching and the expectations communicated to the technician about student training. Technicians cannot be expected to provide students with a positive training experience if they have not been given a clear explanation of the role that they are expected to play. Reasonable expectations of technicians include embracing opportunities to incorporate students into the workflow, effectively demonstrating their roles and responsibilities, treating students with respect, and incorporating feedback regarding student training.

Regular documentation and evaluation of student and technician interactions is one way to determine the effectiveness of these training relationships. It is reasonable to include items on IPPE site evaluation forms that question students specifically about their interactions with technicians. Questions could evaluate the quality of interactions as well as the approximate percentage of training provided by pharmacy technicians. This information will not only assist in the evaluation of specific training sites, it will also help to quantify the magnitude of technician involvement in student teaching.

The potential for resistance among technicians to participate in the training initiatives of their future supervisors cannot be ignored. One way to minimize this conflict is to stress the importance of a learning partnership and identify specific opportunities for pharmacy students to provide valuable educational opportunities for technicians (ie, new drug updates, review sessions for technician certification boards, etc). Another method for increasing motivation among reluctant technicians is to include a teaching/training component in their job standards and reward excellence regularly.

It is important that we broaden our approach to evaluating student learning and begin to recognize the significant role that pharmacy technicians play. With this role comes the need for regular evaluation and the opportunity for greater recognition. It is up to technician employers and pharmacy institutions of learning to take advantage of this chance to further enhance the experiential training of student pharmacists.

Dalia R. Mack, PharmD
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill