Continuing professional development for pharmacy technicians: Start of an evolution?

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Background

Shifts in work task definition and changing expectations of health professional relationships with coworkers and patients have created large demands for hospitals and their various departments to become “learning organizations.”¹ As pharmacy technicians continue to move toward becoming a regulated group of health professionals practising to full scope and assuming full responsibility to manage and provide drug distribution services,² continuing professional development (CPD) programs for pharmacy technicians will become increasingly important. We describe the development and evaluation of a pharmacy technician CPD program within a large regional health authority. The primary goal of the program is to deliver education focused on pharmacy technician practice on a regular basis with structured timelines to encourage a habit of attendance. The secondary goal is to create a sustainable CPD program run by technicians for technicians. The pharmacy technician CPD program seeks to promote responsibility for CPD through pharmacy technician participation as both attendees and presenters. Additionally, the CPD program provides an opportunity to deliver professional development required for pharmacy services change initiatives.

Description of program

This project was conducted at the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority (WRHA), a publicly funded organization that provides acute, long-term, and community health services for approximately 800,000 people. Pharmacy personnel within the WRHA Pharmacy Program (WRHAPP) consist of 150 full-time equivalent (FTE) unionized pharmacists and 150 FTE unionized technicians, who provide pharmacy services throughout 8 hospitals

with approximately 2000 beds.

In 2005, a WRHAPP-conducted learning needs assessment survey revealed limited quantity and perceived limited quality of pharmacy technician CPD within the WRHAPP. Respondents indicated that preferred learning topics included medication and disease state information, and aseptic technique upgrading.³ In early 2008, interviews with pharmacy staff revealed that little technician CPD had occurred, and that which did occur was undesirable due to mandatory attendance with presentations geared towards pharmacists. In February 2008 a proposal for a pharmacy technician CPD program within the WRHAPP was approved. A delivery model that was centrally coordinated by a WRHAPP practice development pharmacy technician (as part of a 1.0 EFT position) was chosen as the instructional strategy.

The WRHAPP practice development pharmacy technician solicits volunteer presenters to deliver the programming for the WRHA Pharmacy Technician CPD Program. Presenters are invited to create a new presentation or to deliver an encore presentation. Presenters are pharmacy technicians where possible. Pharmacists, pharmacy students and pharmacy residents serve as presenters only when the program topic requires specialized clinical knowledge. When non-technicians present, the presentation must be appropriate for a technician audience. When a potential presenter is identified, the presenter can request approval for up to 6 hours of paid time for presentation development. Presenters develop a 25-minute presentation and deliver it at lunchtime (repeated twice for different shifts that technicians attend on unpaid time). Presenters travel to each worksite to do a face-to-face presentation, or the presentation is done using

teleconferencing facilities. The WRHAPP practice development pharmacy technician promotes presentations (e-mails, posters and in person) and presentation schedules. Contact with each site is required to secure space, equipment and teleconferencing facilities. Reimbursement of interfacility travel and parking costs is provided according to WRHAPP guidelines.

Evaluation

From May 2008 to April 2011, a total of 74 presentations were delivered at 6 hospital pharmacies in the city of Winnipeg as part of the WRHA Pharmacy Technician CPD Program. Since 2010, most presentations have occurred via teleconferencing to sites with available conferencing equipment. A total of 380 pharmacy technician hours have been spent attending CPD, with consistent attendance across WRHAPP sites. Presentations were delivered by 13 pharmacy technicians, 6 pharmacists, 3 pharmacy residents and 4 pharmacy students. Topics have included medication information (e.g., high-alert drugs, narcotics), disease state information (e.g., blastomycosis), aseptic technique, WRHAPP procedures and programs (e.g., investigational drugs and special access medications), technician regulation (e.g., national exam for pharmacy technicians) and general professional development topics (e.g., patient safety, drug information for pharmacy technicians).

A survey of randomly selected attendees (response rate 35/50, 70%) conducted in 2008 revealed that attendees were satisfied overall with the program (Table 1).⁴ Survey and interview feedback was obtained from presenters ($n = 4$) in 2008. Pharmacy technician presenters spent a median of 3.5 (range 1–5) hours at work and a median of 3.5 (range 1–5) hours at home preparing for their presentations. Of presenters, 3/4 (75%) felt that time for presentation and delivery was adequate, felt supported by their co-workers, felt that they had improved their public speaking skills and would present again. All (100%) presenters experienced increased confidence in presentation delivery and felt that they were supported by their managers and the practice development staff.

The time spent by the WRHAPP practice development pharmacy technician on the WRHA Pharmacy Technician CPD Program has decreased from 4 hours per week in 2008 to 2 hours per month in 2011 (approximately 1 hour per presentation).

Discussion

Since 2008, the WRHA Pharmacy Technician CPD Program has delivered regularly scheduled phar-

TABLE 1 Pharmacy technician attendees' satisfaction with Lunch and Learn programming

Statement	Agree/strongly agree ($n = 35$) n (%)
The topics presented were relevant to my work practice.	26 (74)
I learned something new from the lunch and learn sessions.	29 (83)
The presentations I attended did not go beyond the scheduled time.	32 (91)
I have enough notice of upcoming lunch and learn presentations at my site.	30 (86)
I appreciate the lunch and learn presentations being prepared by technicians.	29 (83)
I plan to attend upcoming lunch and learn presentations.	31 (89)

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement using a 5-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree).

macy technician CPD across the WRHAPP. The majority of presentations have been delivered by technicians.

The WRHA Pharmacy Technician CPD Program supports the transformation of pharmacy technicians from an unregulated group of workers to a regulated group of health professionals, educates the workforce about important topics, promotes a learning culture and ensures equitable access to education for all pharmacy technicians. The WRHA Pharmacy Technician CPD Program provides professional development required for pharmacy services change initiatives and a mechanism by which pharmacy technicians will maintain and enhance their own competence. It delivers CPD in a way that is sustainable by the organization, and that makes efficient use of human and material resources at the various sites (e.g., teleconferencing), while minimizing risk of service loss (e.g., removing staff from their place of work for purposes of training). We found that the WRHA Pharmacy Technician CPD Program was scalable across the WRHA at reasonable cost. To implement a similar pharmacy technician CPD program elsewhere will require operating resources (paid time) for a coordinator, as well as scheduling flexibility for presenters and attendees and the political will to make participants available to present and attend, as well as to develop expertise in the coordinator.

Challenges to the WRHA Pharmacy Technician CPD Program include the ongoing development of technician presenters and consistent attendance by pharmacy technicians. Program changes that have improved attendance include topics that focus on areas described in the PEBC national qualifying

examination blueprint. Additionally, using teleconferencing facilities for presentations allows many WRHA sites to participate at the same time, reducing the workload for each presenter. Further efficacy has been gained through posting the presentations online, so that pharmacy technicians who could not attend in person are able to review the presentations and do self-assessment questions.

Conclusion

Encouraging a cultural shift towards an active CPD program for pharmacy technicians within workplaces is challenging, yet essential to meet the requirements of current and future pharmacy practice.² The creation and evaluation of the WRHA Pharmacy Technician CPD Program using a centralized model of coordination and delivery has allowed us to implement and refine what is now a self-sustaining pharmacy technician CPD program within a large regional health authority. ■

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