Part 3: Perspectives of pharmacy technicians on practice change

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THIS IS THE THIRD OF 5 SHORT ARTICLES REPORTING the results of a survey of pharmacy professionals across Canada to inform the Pharmacy Thought Leadership Summit that took place on June 23-24, 2016, in Calgary, Alberta. The goal of the summit was to reach agreement on priorities and actions that the Canadian Pharmacists Association (CPhA) can take forward with partner organizations to achieve an optimal future for pharmacy practice—a future that reflects the aspirations of pharmacy professionals and the health care needs of Canadians. Additional details on the methodology have been published previously.¹

In addition to the survey of the participants of the summit (as was discussed in our previous 2 papers in this series),^{2,3} a second survey was administered concurrently to pharmacy professionals across Canada who were not invited to participate in the summit. The rationale for this second survey was to reach a broader representation of Canadian pharmacists and pharmacy technicians, including those who could not attend the summit meeting. As part of this second survey, a number of national pharmacy associations were

asked to invite their members to participate using the communications and outreach tools that were likely to reach the target audience. Participating organizations included CPhA, the Canadian Society of Hospital Pharmacists, the Canadian Association of Pharmacy Technicians and a number of provincial pharmacy professional organizations. More details on the methodology used in this second survey are published elsewhere.¹

In total, 183 pharmacy technicians responded to this second, broader survey, representing 28% of all survey respondents. Because of the large response from this highly understudied group of pharmacy professionals, this article reports the responses from pharmacy technicians.

Pharmacy technicians play a key role in the workplace environment of pharmacies. As such, they were asked about their level of agreement with various workplace barriers to pharmacy professionals using their expertise to optimally improve patient care. The results are reported in Table 1. While a majority of responding technicians agreed or strongly agreed with all 9 workplace barriers presented in the survey, 2 barriers in particular had a very high level of agreement (more than 85%): “Insufficient time for pharmacy staff to provide advanced services” and “Too many competing priorities in the pharmacy workplace.” These 2 barriers likely go hand in hand, as it is hard to provide advanced services if there are too many other priorities.

Participants had an opportunity to provide additional comments in this section of the questionnaire, which helped to provide context to the quantitative results in Table 1.

Pharmacy technicians feel that there are too many competing priorities in the pharmacy workplace.

TABLE 1 Pharmacy technician level of agreement with workplace barriers in the pharmacy

Please rate the extent to which you agree that the following are workplace barriers to pharmacy professionals using their expertise to optimally improve patient care:	Agree/strongly agree* (n = 183)
Insufficient time for pharmacy staff to provide advanced services	87.4
Too many competing priorities in the pharmacy workplace	86.9
Lack of pharmacy technician staff to support the provision of advanced services	76.0
Lack of role clarity between pharmacists and pharmacy technicians	67.8
Limited support from management to offer advanced services	67.8
Lack of opportunity to explore service innovation in the work environment	67.8
Lack of an appropriate pharmacy layout	61.2
Lack of business models to implement advanced pharmacy services in the community pharmacy setting	61.2
Lack of resources to provide clinical pharmacy services	59.0

*The percentage of respondents who ranked their level of agreement with the item as *strongly agree* or *agree* on a 1 to 5 Likert scale.

TABLE 2 Pharmacy technician perceptions of professional satisfaction

To what extent do you agree with the following:	Agree/strongly agree* (n = 174)
I anticipate remaining in my profession for more than 5 years	85.1
There is a high level of job stress in my work environment	83.9
I am able to keep up with new developments in the pharmacy profession in order to maintain my professional competency	83.3
I foresee myself working more as a member of collaborative health care teams	81.0
I have plans to take the required training to offer new pharmacy services	67.8
I am restricted in my ability to expand pharmacy service offerings	66.1
I am satisfied with how I see the pharmacy profession evolving	58.0
I experience role ambiguity on a regular basis	56.9
I am able to provide expanded scope services to patients/clients	50.6
I have control over decisions that affect my work environment	42.0

*The percentage of respondents who ranked their level of agreement with the item as *strongly agree* or *agree* on a 1 to 5 Likert scale.

The RPhT has no “power”—they are paid poorly and continue to kowtow to mediocre pharmacists. Should get rid of nonregulated support staff, only hire RPhT behind the dispensary, pay them equal to hospital pay, incorporate a triage practice environment.
—Pharmacy technician

Pharmacy technicians in the community are extremely underused to their full scope.
—Pharmacy technician

Similar to how physicians create barriers for pharmacists is how pharmacists are creating barriers for technicians. — Pharmacy technician

Pharmacy technicians were also asked about their professional satisfaction in the survey. Tables 2 and 3 report the questions and responses of the survey responses.

Pharmacy technicians appear to be satisfied with their work, with many anticipating

TABLE 3 Pharmacy technicians' indicators of professional satisfaction

What value do you place on each of these as indicators of professional satisfaction today?	Important/very important * (n = 183)
Continuing education opportunities	94.5
Adequate staffing in the workplace	94.0
Innovation in the workplace	94.0
Support to offer advanced services	92.9
Opportunities for advancement	92.3
New technology in the workplace	91.3
Role delineation in the workplace	89.1
Professional autonomy (e.g., employer/payer influence on service provision)	82.5

*The percentage of respondents who rated the item as *very important* or *important* on a 1 to 5 Likert scale.

remaining in the profession for more than 5 years (85%). However, there is concern that there is a high level of job stress in their work environment. A majority of pharmacy technicians indicated that there are 8 areas related to professional satisfaction, led by continuing education opportunities, adequate staffing in the workplace and innovation in the workplace. Several technicians took the time to write about their workplace and career satisfaction.

[One of the largest threats to my professional satisfaction] is pharmacists who treat pharmacy technicians as inferiors and continually put them down every work day.
—Pharmacy technician

There is significant ambiguity about what the pharmacy technician profession is about, with a lack of clarity on both current and future roles. Professional satisfaction

is difficult to attain when one doesn't know what the ultimate goal is. —Pharmacy technician

As a regulated pharmacy technician, I am still surprised at times when pharmacists display a superiority complex and feel they can do my job better than I can just because they are a pharmacist. My job is not their expertise any more than their job is my expertise. —Pharmacy technician

The role of pharmacy technicians has evolved considerably in recent years and is expected to continue to change in the future. This survey has provided insight into the perceptions of pharmacy technicians on their workplace environment and professional satisfaction, which are key considerations for practice change for the profession of pharmacy in Canada. ■

Editorial note

Change management is difficult because change itself is difficult. For many of us, practice change requires upending patterns that have been established and reinforced over many years, and (given our own choice) most of us would rather continue along as-is rather than invest time, effort and risk in changing. As highlighted in this study, it can sometimes be easier to focus on external constraints rather than the internalized barriers (including simple inertia) that make change management difficult. A central challenge for the profession—and for individual pharmacists and pharmacy technicians—is to determine what are the real external barriers to practice change that we collectively need to address vs those barriers that we frame as external problems that are actually our own internal, inertia-driven resistance to doing things differently.

—Zubin Austin
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References

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