Why you should mentor a pharmacy student

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I AM A FOURTH-YEAR PHARMACY STUDENT AT THE University of Waterloo. While reading through provincial college newsletters for a research project, I noticed that some pharmacy schools had been recruiting preceptors due to a shortage.¹ As undergraduate pharmacy programs in Canada transition to the doctor of pharmacy (PharmD) program, more clinical rotations and preceptors will be needed.^{2,3} My preceptors have played a pivotal role in my life, and I wonder what the future of pharmacy education would look like if there were not enough pharmacist mentors.

Role modelling is used across health care professional education programs and teaches students values, skills and professional qualities that are difficult to learn in the classroom.⁴ Experiential learning is an important part of every pharmacy program in Canada. While on placements, students learn how to be pharmacists by observing and doing, and it has been shown that early exposure to practice settings builds confidence.² In a previous issue of this journal, Frankel and Austin⁵ showed that students who were mentored by well-rounded patient care advocates became more confident pharmacists than those who learned from meek, hesitant, apologetic mentors.

Pharmacy programs across Canada depend on volunteer preceptors—at the University of Waterloo, there are three 4-month co-op placements and three 8-week experiential rotations. By the time I finish pharmacy school, I will have had at least 5 different preceptors. My first co-op placement in an independent community pharmacy gave me the chance to learn from 4 different pharmacists. My second and third placements involved time at both the university

and a community health centre (CHC). I worked with 2 professors at the university (one is a clinical pharmacist at the CHC; the other is a pharmacist involved with travel health) and 2 other clinical pharmacists at the CHC. Each of my 3 rotations in my final year will introduce me to a new team of pharmacists.

I recognize that students can be a burden. We can't sign off on anything by ourselves, and you have to keep an ear out for us when we're talking to patients. We need you to slow down and explain things that are routine, such as how to properly check a prescription things that are easier to learn in a pharmacy than in the classroom. All of this takes time out of an already busy day. Although we might make mistakes, we're not careless, and we want to improve. We have so much to learn, and we want to put our best foot forward for our preceptors.

But we need strong role models to teach us how to be effective pharmacists. As students, we want to eavesdrop when you counsel a patient, and then we want to be able to do it ourselves. Teach us your tricks for remembering drug interactions or side effects to watch for with certain medications. Let us soak up all the tips that you've gathered over the years. Show us the other side of pharmacy, too—show us how much you care about your patients, and tell us stories about patients who have improved under your care.

You may find that you gain something out of the match. Hopefully you will find it rewarding to be able to influence a student during a formative time in their education. Students will also help you stay current—we learn the most up-to-date material in the classroom, and then critically analyze it and use it on placement. Some of the best learning experiences I've had were

during placements where I consolidated what I learned in class.

I am fortunate to have had excellent preceptors. For me, a good mentor challenges you to achieve more than you thought you could. You may or may not end up pursuing a similar career, but a good mentor offers perspective on different career options and equips you with the resources and skills to follow whatever path you are interested in. They may put you on the spot, knowing that this leads to good learning opportunities. I can't tell you the number of times my stomach has dropped when my preceptors have asked me to counsel on a medication or take a phone call from a frustrated patient, especially during my first placement. Good mentors will connect you with others and grow your professional network. And they encourage you, which is priceless for a young, inexperienced pharmacy student.

Notably, my 3 co-op supervisors have been strong, accomplished, female pharmacists with graduate degrees. This is important, given that a recent study of health professional students found that women compared with men have a harder time finding role models that they identify with and who are of the same gender.⁴ However, you don't need an advanced degree or a unique practice setting to be an excellent preceptor. I believe that a preceptor in a traditional practice who is excited about teaching is better than a detached preceptor with a specialized practice.

Here's the bottom line from me to you, from a pharmacy student to a practising pharmacist: take a chance on a student. Mentor them, watch them become a full-fledged pharmacist, and know that you played a key role in their development. ■

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