

First year of registration

— the challenges ahead for technicians

It is one year since the Royal Pharmaceutical Society opened a voluntary register for pharmacy technicians. Darren Leech looks at the number of technicians who have registered and explains why technicians need to ensure their interests are protected

Pharmacy technicians are at the dawn of a new era. Many are only beginning to understand the implications of regulation by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society and the issues that arise as a consequence. However, in order to play an active role in the development of pharmacy in the future, technicians will need to work, think and behave differently.

— Progress to date

One year ago the Society opened a voluntary register for pharmacy technicians.¹ There is still no precise figure for the number of people eligible to apply for registration as a pharmacy technician, although early estimates put the number at around 15,000.² At the end of 2005 the number of technicians who had successfully applied was just over 2,000.

Interestingly for hospital pharmacy, an area of the profession which has previously prided itself in supporting and developing its technician workforce, the number of registered pharmacy technicians is currently fewer than that from the community sector.³

— Hospital registration rate

A number of factors may have contributed to the lower uptake of registration in the hospital sector (see Panel 1).

Most obviously, there are fewer pharmacy technicians working in hospitals than there are in community pharmacy. Furthermore, the distraction of NHS pay modernisation, under Agenda for Change, may have led a number of technicians to postpone registration until "Agenda for Change is out of the way".

Many employers seem to have heeded the Association of Pharmacy Technicians UK advice to only employ pharmacy technicians who are already registered, or who they are

confident will be eligible to register.⁴ This avoids the potential for future employment relations issues, which may arise if a pharmacy technician employed during the voluntary period was subsequently unable to register, for whatever reason. This has also raised awareness among employers that they should engage with their current pharmacy technician workforce to ensure that they have the necessary information ready for their application before the mandatory cut-off point.

However, another factor contributing to the low application rate among hospital pharmacy technicians appears to be a lack of information and organisational policy on registration from their employer. Although it is not the direct responsibility of the employer to supply this information, all employers will need to review their operational and human resources policies to ensure that they reflect the requirement for pharmacy technicians to be registered.

In the community and industrial sectors, many employers are paying registration fees for the technicians they employ, as is common practice for pharmacist employers. It is also becoming increasingly common for employers to provide membership of the Association of Pharmacy Technicians UK as an employment benefit. A small number of hospitals are now paying for, or contributing to, initial registration costs for pharmacy technicians, although this is not common. Since many pharmacy technicians in the NHS will have to pay their fees themselves, they may be less inspired to register voluntarily.

Although a surge of new applications to register with the Society is widely expected in early 2006 — as pharmacy technicians will have waited for the opportunity to pay the whole year fee — there is a worrying number of anecdotal reports that some technicians are not aware, engaged or even worried about registration and that they will not be until they have to. Clearly, it would be unrealistic to expect every pharmacy technician to register early, but this apparent lack of awareness may require a targeted campaign of information during the

Panel 1: Reasons for fewer hospital technician registrants

- There are fewer pharmacy technicians in the hospital sector
- Pharmacy technicians may have been distracted by Agenda for Change
- There appears to be a lack of information, awareness and policy relating to pharmacy technician registration within hospitals
- There is a low rate of registration fee payment by NHS employers compared to those in the community sector
- There is an apparent lack of awareness and a degree of apathy among some hospital pharmacy technicians
- Registration is not yet considered as a critical for further role development

latter stages of the voluntary period, possibly via pharmacists.

Community pharmacy employers eager to better use their workforce, but conscious of reservations among their pharmacist employees, seem to associate pharmacy technician registration with deciding to delegate tasks previously undertaken by pharmacists to technicians. Conversely, in many areas of hospital pharmacy the role of the pharmacy technician has already expanded well ahead of the community sector. As a result, pharmacists have been enabled to further increase and develop their clinical skills. This earlier development of pharmacy technicians in hospitals added weight to the long-standing debate around registering pharmacy technicians with the Society.⁵

The development of pharmacy technicians in hospitals has been progressing independently of the registration agenda. It may be that further expansion of their roles and responsibilities is now much more likely as time progresses and confidence grows in a regulated pharmacy technician workforce.

Darren Leech is president of the Association of Pharmacy Technicians UK

Support for early registration

At an APTUK conference held in Edinburgh last month, universal support for registration and regulation by the Society was reiterated by leading pharmacy technicians drawn from all home countries. APTUK also re-stated its advice to all pharmacy technicians, that they should register now, and not leave it until the last moment.

Section 60 Order

The imminent Pharmacy Order under Section 60 of the Health Act 1999, which relates to the new regulatory arrangements for pharmacists and pharmacy technicians, is expected to be published for consultation shortly. When this happens, pharmacy technicians will need to draw upon their various networks and forums to ensure that a robust, well-informed and co-ordinated response is submitted.

Regulation

It seems that real progress has been made by pharmacy technicians, despite some of the hospital specific issues described above. At the APTUK conference, it was noted that APTUK now has two of its members on the Society's Council.⁶ However, when the clear distinction between the role of the Society for pharmacists (as members) and for pharmacy technicians (as registrants)⁷ was explained, many pharmacy technicians seemed determined to ensure that they were engaged and involved in both the regulatory and representative aspects of their future professional life. They are slowly recognising that the Society's primary obligation will be to its membership, ie, to pharmacists, and that it will be up to pharmacy technicians to ensure that their voice is heard, their concerns are recognised and that their interests are protected.

As health care professionals, pharmacists appear to be almost unique in having a pro-

fessional body that acts as both regulator and representative body. Almost all other health professions have separate regulatory and representative bodies (see Panel 2). With the Society as their regulator and APTUK as their professional representative body, pharmacy technicians will be no different to the vast majority of other health care professionals.

Further implications

Under the new system of regulation, pharmacy technicians will need to consider how professional issues and functions which the Society is unlikely or unable to address will be tackled.

Examples of these professional issues and functions are:

- Pharmacy technicians need to ensure that their specific concerns are given adequate priority and raised in a way that ensures effective and timely responses from appropriate authorities, be it the Society, employers, the Government or others.
- Pharmacy technicians need to have credible, effective and democratically representative leadership at both local and national levels.
- Innovation, development and best practice for pharmacy technicians should be adequately promoted and supported — even when it challenges traditional practice.
- Pharmacy technicians will increasingly demand the assurance of effective individual, local and national representation. This applies to professional practice matters as well as to employment relations and pay negotiation.
- Events to support and help pharmacy technicians effectively undertake continuing professional development, complemented by adequate mentorship and support networks will also become increasingly important.

Many believe that these are roles which APTUK should step up and deliver — either in a more formal way, or in the way that they do currently, but in increasing volume.

In light of these considerations, APTUK would like pharmacy technicians to consider the following question: "How will you, as pharmacy technicians, ensure that your personal views are known and that your professional best interests are represented, protected and progressed?"

Those pharmacy technicians who choose to ignore this question and to assume that others will "sort things out" on their behalf may come to regret their inertia if the professional issues and functions listed opposite are not addressed adequately.

Challenges ahead

APTUK is scheduled to release a new strategy document in the last quarter of this financial year. This document is likely to reiterate the core principles of the organisation, while looking to tackle each of the issues outlined above, and many other issues faced by pharmacy technicians in all sectors of practice and from all home countries.

What does seem certain, is that pharmacy technicians need to better understand, more actively engage and more assertively make their case for an increasing role in the development and delivery of plans for the future of pharmacy. In addition, they will need to engage with the Society to ensure that effective regulation is implemented for the new technician registrants.

Hospital chief pharmacists, however, will be reassured to hear that amid all of this organisational and political change, there still seems to be a real desire among pharmacy technicians to help further improve the quality and safety of pharmacy services for patients.

References

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Panel 2: Examples of professional groups and their regulatory and professional bodies

Professional group	Regulatory body	Professional representation
Pharmacists	Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain	Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain
Doctors	General Medical Council	British Medical Association
Occupational therapists	Health Professions Council	British Association of Occupational Therapists
Physiotherapists	Health Professions Council	Chartered Society of Physiotherapy
Nurses	Nursing and Midwifery Council	Royal College of Nursing
Pharmacy technicians	Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain	Association of Pharmacy Technicians UK