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What will it mean for technicians to be part of a profession?

By Helen Middleton, MRPharmS

Professional socialisation, the subject of this article, is a topic of current interest to pharmacy technicians as they prepare for statutory registration and the changes to their professional status that this and other developments may bring



Teaching methods and the level of classroom activity contribute to professional socialisation

Professional socialisation is the process by which a person acquires the values, attitudes, behaviours, language and jargon of an occupation or profession. It is a multi-staged, multi-phased and fragmented process which does not stop on completion of formal training. Socialisation can be divided into three phases:

- Anticipatory
- Formal training
- Post qualification

In the anticipatory phase, individuals get a sense of the profession from previous experiences. Gender, social class and schooling all contribute to the type of occupation an individual enters. Anticipatory socialisation also includes images built up from observation.

The formal training phase includes the formal studies required to qualify for a professional role. The curriculum is often referred to as a unique body of professional knowledge and this is one way of claiming professional status. The curriculum, teaching methods, level of classroom activity, practice activities and exposure to the workplace all contribute to socialisation.

Training courses, postgraduate qualifications and informal learning contribute to the post-qualification phase.

Helen Middleton is continuing professional development manager for London Pharmacy Education & Training. Correspondence to helen.middleton@chelwest.nhs.uk

Studies of socialisation

Studies of professional preparation and socialisation explore the processes experienced by those becoming a member of a professional group and the transition from student to qualified practitioner. There are two main schools of thought when discussing the sociology of the professions.¹ Functionalists view the professions as a group, with a high degree of homogeneity and consensus in which professional norms are reflected and reinforced.

Interactionists regard professional identities to be flexible and consider socialisation to be an ongoing process with no specific endpoint.

Whichever viewpoint is preferred, it is clear that new members of any profession (known as “occupational neophytes”) have to learn both the technical and more tacit aspects of the expertise that is central to their profession, along with acquiring a cultural competence in relation to a profession’s social networks and associated role expectations. However, it is worth noting that qualified pharmacy technicians are not “occupational neophytes” — they are already socialised as pharmacy technicians. It is important to examine to what extent they are socialised as professionals and their perceptions of their “professional” role.

What is a profession?

There is no single definition of a profession. Traditionally, professions have portrayed themselves as special, maintaining

power and status by handing down knowledge and values from one generation of professionals to the next.² They have preserved their privileged place in society by establishing and maintaining an air of mystery about the elements that make up professional services.³

However, the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) has challenged these traditional ideas and suggests that competence may be a more modern way to describe professionalism.⁴ A US study describes ten characteristics of a professional, which are listed in Panel 1 (p412).⁵

Status of technicians

The most significant areas of debate over pharmacy technicians’ professional status relate to autonomy and the knowledge and skills of the profession.

Autonomy Pharmacy technicians are defined by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society as “pharmacy support staff” and work under the (indirect) supervision of a pharmacist. The pharmacy technicians’ code of ethics states that: “Pharmacists have overall responsibility for the pharmaceutical services being provided to patients. Pharmacy technicians . . . are responsible for their own professional actions.” Since it has been said that: “A profession has legitimate control over its own work, whereas an occupation does not,”⁶ the role of the pharmacy technicians might be considered to be an occupation rather than a profession, because their work is dictated by pharmacists.

Panel 1: Characteristics of a professional⁵

- Unique knowledge and skills
- Commitment to self-improvement of skills and knowledge
- Service orientation
- Pride in the profession
- Conventional relationship with clients
- Creativity and innovation
- Conscience and trustworthiness
- Accountability for work
- Ethically sound decision-making
- Leadership

However, the RCP suggests that autonomy is an outdated concept because, in a modern NHS, all health care professionals, including doctors, need to work to targets within evidence-based guidelines. Privileges such as professional self-governance have been replaced by accountability.

Knowledge and skills Professional status and power depend on claims of unique knowledge not shared with other occupations.⁷ It is therefore important to decide whether a pharmacy technician's knowledge base is unique or a "watered down" version of a pharmacist's unique knowledge base. Pharmacists' expertise on drugs and their use, including drug delivery and development, supports their claim to a unique ability to advise about drug-related matters

in clinical settings. Pharmacy technicians are increasingly undertaking clinical roles, for example, medicines management, causing a blurring of the boundaries between pharmacists' and pharmacy technicians' work. However, it has been said that, to be an independent profession, pharmacy technicians would need a scientific knowledge base that is different from pharmacists relating to, for example, computing, robotic dispensing and safe working systems.⁸

It is interesting to consider whether statutory registration will result in pharmacy technicians becoming professionals in their own right or registered semi-professionals. Using a traditional view of professions, Brown⁸ describes ten stages to achieving full professional status. These are listed in Panel 2, together with my comments about pharmacy technicians' progress towards them.

— Technician's perceptions

A forum on the Association of Pharmacy Technicians UK website recently included an extract of an article entitled "becoming a profession". There was a great deal of debate among members about the professional status of technicians. Arguments used by members to justify pharmacy technicians having a professional status included that:

- Registered pharmacy technicians are expected to take part in continuing professional development
- "Pharmacy technician" is due to become a protected title

- APTUK and the Society assert that pharmacy technicians are professionals
- All nurses call themselves professionals — although formal training of nurses is now degree level, many nurses only have diplomas

Arguments used by members to dispute that pharmacy technicians have professional status included that:

- Pharmacists will always limit pharmacy technicians' autonomy
- Although some technicians have taken on extended roles, not all of their duties are considered to be professional
- Formal qualifications are not degree level
- They are not paid as professionals — under Agenda for Change, all other registered professionals are paid at band 5 on qualification but technicians are paid at band 4

— Conclusions

If the statutory registration of pharmacy technicians is to result in a change of status from "occupation" to "profession", this is just the beginning of what will be a series of changes that will require ongoing socialisation to smooth the transition. Pharmacy technicians have mastered the technical expertise for their roles but they now need to master the more tacit aspects of the expertise that is central to being a professional. In addition, they will need to acquire a cultural competence in relation to a profession's social networks and associated role expectations.

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Panel 2: Stages to achieving full professional status⁸ and the progress made by pharmacy technicians towards these

Stage	Progress	Comments
Not be viewed as just a "till operator"	Achieved	
Upgrade qualification requirements	Not achieved	
Form a professional body	Achieved	APTUK has existed since the 1950s
Change professions' name	Partly achieved	The title "pharmacy technician" is due to become protected
Slough off technical work	Partly achieved	Pharmacy assistants now do much of the technical work
Allow in only those who have completed the new training regimen	Partly achieved	Eventually, only technicians who have an NVQ level 3 in pharmacy services and an underpinning knowledge certificate will be able to register
Be subject to internal conflict	Probably occurring	Discussion forums indicate some conflict among technicians about their status
Jostle for territory with other professions	Probably occurring	Letters in <i>The Pharmaceutical Journal</i> indicate jostling with pharmacists
Change the law to achieve a monopoly (eg, for dispensing)	Not achieved	
Develop a code of ethics	Achieved	

"APTUK" is the Association of Pharmacy Technicians UK and "NVQ" is national vocational qualification