

What do technicians think about registration and professionalism?

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Statutory registration of pharmacy technicians is set to become law in the future. This article describes a study in which pharmacy technicians' perceptions of registration and becoming part of a profession were analysed. Some of the concepts described in a previous article in *Hospital Pharmacist*¹ about professional socialisation provide a useful background to the issues mentioned here.

Study design

Pharmacy technicians working in hospital pharmacies in the London region were invited to participate in the study in spring 2006. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore pharmacy technicians' perceptions of:

- Barriers to registration
- The benefits and challenges associated with becoming a professional and belonging to a new profession
- The extent to which pharmacy technicians perform a professional role
- Whether pharmacy technicians' qualifications and training prepare them for a professional role

For the latter two topics, information given in "blogs" (internet journals written in

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a personal tone) was taken into account to structure the interviews.

Audio recordings of the interviews were made, which were transcribed onto a computer for coding and analysis. Analysis involved looking for patterns and identifying cases that did and did not fit the emerging concepts.

Nine participants, who were all females in senior roles (MTO3 and above), took part in the study. Time since qualification ranged from two years to more than 20 years.

Barriers to registration

Six technicians had not registered with the Royal Pharmaceutical Society at the time of the study. Three were unable to do so and faced significant barriers to registration, which are described in Panel 1 (p101).

Among those who had chosen not to register, cost (including the cost of indemnity insurance and obtaining a health declaration from a GP) was the most commonly cited reason. Other barriers included:

- The complexity of the registration forms
- The need to undertake continuing professional development once registered
- Concerns that registration meant that, in theory, they could be struck off and not be able to work, even though they did not believe this would be an issue for them in practice
- Feeling "unwanted" by the Society

- Assertion that many extended roles were now being carried out by pharmacy technicians, without the need for registration

Why register?

Three respondents had joined the voluntary register of pharmacy technicians. Two of these were active members of the Association of Pharmacy Technicians UK (APTUK) and felt that they should be helping to lead the way regarding registration. One had a pragmatic approach — she was going to have to register at some point, so she felt she might as well do so now.

The Society lists the benefits of registering pharmacy technicians as:²

- Makes "pharmacy technician" a protected title
- Introduces standards of professional conduct that will need to be complied with
- Upholds the reputation of technicians
- Increases professional recognition

Whether they had a protected title was not important to most of the technicians surveyed. However, one respondent viewed it positively, pointing out that it would prevent those with no qualifications and little experience coming from abroad to work as locum pharmacy technicians.

All respondents considered the setting and following of standards of conduct to be important. For example: "I'm hoping that

Panel 1: Barriers to registration for pharmacy technicians

- One technician undertook the Boots the Chemists dispensers certificate in 1996. On attempting to register, she was told that her qualification was not valid and that she must re-train. She is not entitled to do the Boots the Chemists conversion course because she no longer works for the company. She said: "I've got a bit of a problem with this whole technician registration thing . . . in a couple of year's time I can't call myself a pharmacy technician . . . I feel quite upset . . . like somebody's robbing me of my qualification . . ." She is currently working as a senior pharmacy technician and undertaking the NVQ level 3 in pharmacy services, which she believes to be a "paper exercise". She considers herself to be a qualified pharmacy technician and has been keeping records of her CPD.
- One technician qualified overseas in 2000 and, at the time of the study, was in the process of registering with the Society. She said: "For me as an overseas applicant it's just that I don't know if they'll be able to match up my course . . ." "I've read the paperwork . . . I know that we've covered it and even all the competences on the NVQ . . . but we'll just have to wait and see . . . my work permit is what keeps me in the country legally so [if I cannot register] I'll either have to find another job and change my career or . . . go back home . . ."
- Another technician was unable to register at the time of the study because she had taken a career break to bring up her child and so could not yet meet the work experience requirements for registration.

"NVQ" is national vocational qualification and "CPD" is continuing professional development

[registration] will help raise standards . . . I think there are huge differences in how some technicians work . . . and how much responsibility they take for their own actions in their work".

Most participants believed that registration would help uphold the reputation of pharmacy technicians. Most also thought that registration would bring professional recognition. Nevertheless, one participant pointed out that achieving professional status from the Society did not guarantee recognition by others. Instead, she linked recognition with a search for a professional identity. She said: "I get this . . . from my own family . . . [introducing me as a] pharmacist . . . I'm a pharmacy technician . . . [I] want to be recognised as a pharmacy technician . . . recognition of your role as a separate identity in pharmacy is very important".

Gaining more professional recognition was associated with increasing the profile of pharmacy technicians. One participant hoped that registration would raise public awareness and another hoped it would attract people into the profession. She said: "I think maybe pharmacy technicians will become . . . known in the public limelight because of the fact [that] we are becoming a professional body and people will hear eventually about it going through parliament . . . so people will probably start to be aware of a pharmacy technician . . .".

Other benefits mentioned included the possibility of a structured post-qualification career pathway being developed and the potential for more extended roles. One respondent disputed that these benefits stem from becoming registered as professionals, rather than just being a natural development of the pharmacy technician role.

Challenges

Changing technicians' attitudes was identified as one of the main challenges of becoming a registered professional. For example, one respondent believed that some technicians "just want to do their dispensing and go home".

Fear of change and of the unknown were also identified as a challenge by some respondents. Finding the time to undertake CPD was another issue, particularly for part-time workers with children.

Pharmacists' attitudes were also identified as a challenge. For example: "I think sometimes there's an issue . . . treading on the pharmacists toes, especially around areas like checking and . . . ward work . . .". Another said: "We're not a threat to anybody else . . . we want to be recognised for the job that we do without treading on anybody else's toes . . .".

The need to live up to expectations and maintain standards was another common theme. For example: "... we've got to live up to the expectation, work by the . . . code of ethics . . . show that we're responsible and accountable . . . that we're ready to take on different roles . . . we've pushed the benefits, we've pushed what will be good for the Society, for the . . . profession in general . . . now we've got to deliver it".

One respondent thought that challenges would be minimal because technicians' jobs were not going to change dramatically.

Training and learning

The formal qualifications studied by the participants are listed in Panel 2. A typical comment about the college training

pharmacy technicians received 10-15 years ago was: "You were lectured . . . you wrote notes and you put that information . . . on an exam paper . . . you just had to regurgitate it . . .". According to one educational theory, this is known as the "replicative" mode of knowledge use (see Panel 3, p102).³

It was, however, recognised that formal qualifications for pharmacy technicians have evolved to include assignments to help students apply their knowledge (ie, using the applicative mode of knowledge use, see Panel 3). For example, one respondent said: "the BTEC's changed a lot . . . more in a practical way . . . case studies with patient focus . . . it's a lot better now".

The respondents believed that their formal qualifications provided the knowledge and skills relevant at the time to become qualified pharmacy technicians. However, they thought that informal work-based learning had contributed most to their professional preparation. All said that they were influenced more by experiences than theory — and emphasised the value of applying theory to practice at work. For example, one said: "my experience actually working probably . . . made me more ready . . . to be a professional than my actual formal qualification. I had to be responsible and accountable and I think that was good grounding for understanding what my professional role was going to be".

It should be noted that pharmacy technicians' formal training is vocational from the start — they study for a qualification part-time while working. Whether vocational learning, particularly NVQs, can prepare students for professional roles has been debated,^{4,5,6} because this type of learning breaks topics down into small parts, without requiring students to look at the whole picture. Assessment focuses on ticking off every item on a list after which the individual is deemed competent. By contrast, a professional approach to learning focuses on the whole and the importance of making professional judgments, and requires the "association" and "interpretation" modes of knowledge use (see Panel 3).^{3,6}

Post-qualification learning was generally carried out when pharmacy technicians became specialised in a particular practice area, changed their area of practice, were

Panel 2: Formal qualifications of respondents

- BTEC (5 respondents)
- NVQ level 3 in pharmacy services and BTEC (1 respondent)
- Overseas qualification (1 respondent)
- Boots 1 year dispenser course (1 respondent)
- City and Guilds dispensers certificate (1 respondent)

Panel 3: Modes of knowledge use³

- **Replication** — repeating taught knowledge ie, in examinations. Replication does not guarantee that theory has been understood
- **Application** — applying a set of theoretical principles to practice
- **Association** — using an intuitive mode of knowledge that often involves the use of metaphors or images
- **Interpretation** — building up cognitive maps, which form templates through which one perceives things and makes sense of them. The interpretive mode is required in order to make “professional judgements” because the maps provide the basis for justifying actions that cannot be designated as “right” or “wrong”

promoted or returned from a career break. Respondents explained that formal learning consisted of attending study days and obtaining further qualifications. Informal learning usually involved observing, role models and learning from experience. One technician describes how she learnt to be a manager as: “Trial and experience . . . I had the basic understanding . . . I went to the basic managerial training . . . I think it's putting that into practice and evaluating and working with the responses you get back”.

However, respondents recognised that there was a limit to the extent that experience and on-the-job learning could equip them for a professional role. One said: “I learnt to appraise staff without any formal training, with just my own appraisals to go by. I felt uncomfortable as I wasn't sure what I was doing . . . I would not advise anyone to undertake appraisals without training first . . .”. It should be noted that carrying out appraisals involves more complex skills than pharmacy technicians learn as a student, such as making professional judgments.

Professional roles

Roles described as professional by participants were the roles that required them to take responsibility, accountability and make judgments, such as being managers, NVQ assessors and verifiers and performing roles that required them to solve problems in non-routine situations. It was pointed out that these roles are not generally carried out by junior pharmacy technicians, and so the question was raised as to whether it is appropriate to consider all pharmacy technicians as professionals.

There was no consensus as to whether dispensing and checking are professional roles. The issue was summed up by one

respondent, who described checking as: “technical because of . . . the methodical way that you go through it . . . and . . . professional because . . . it's your final responsibility, you're signing to say that's safe, you're the last person before it reaches the patient”. It is worth noting that, despite being perceived by some respondents as purely routine, dispensing and checking are high risk activities.

Gaps in learning

Subjects that pharmacy technicians do not seem to receive training about include:

- Understanding of the code of ethics and concepts of ethical decision-making
- How to undertake CPD

Code of ethics All respondents trained before the production of the pharmacy technicians' code of ethics in 2005 and learnt little or nothing about codes of ethics during their formal training. Most described working under a code of ethics as working to standards. However, it should be noted that standards are only one aspect of the code of ethics — the main emphasis is on moral choices and values. Importantly, standards imply a right or wrong way of doing things but there is rarely a right or wrong way of dealing with ethical dilemmas, and so a code of ethics will not always provide clear solutions.

Many people and organisations (including the Society) believe that judgment and the ability to apply ethical principles to a range of situations are essential to being a professional. Pharmacy technicians' training does not seem to equip them with an understanding of this aspect of professionalism, and this should be addressed.

CPD Most respondents did not learn about CPD during their formal training. Instead, they were led to believe that there would not be a need for formal learning beyond their qualification. As one respondent explained, the message given was that: “You train, you qualify and then that's it.” It is particularly surprising that CPD was not included in the formal training of one of the respondents, completed as recently as 2003, since it was then widely known that technicians would need to undertake CPD once registered.

The responses indicate that the technicians taking part in this study had all undertaken considerable learning and development since qualifying and were all recording CPD. Some had learnt about CPD by attending training courses and some by self-directed learning.

The Society's model of CPD involves reflective practice. This is a skill that pharmacy technicians' formal training and method of learning will not have prepared them for, and so opportunities for technicians to learn about CPD are needed. Courses and other CPD support are becoming more widely

available — for example local CPD facilitators, assisted by London Pharmacy Education and Training, are in place in many hospitals in London and the south east of England⁷ and, since the time of this study, CPD workshops have been developed collaboratively by the Association of Pharmacy Technicians UK and the Centre for Pharmacy Postgraduate Education.⁸

Conclusion

The pharmacy technicians who took part in this study saw themselves as professionals and wanted to be recognised as such. Many expressed concerns that the public were not aware of pharmacy technicians and hoped that registration would raise their profile. A search for a professional identity, separate to that of pharmacists, was linked to professional recognition.

While the participants in this study undertook a range of different qualifications, their formal learning appeared to be confined to replicative and applicative modes of knowledge use. Respondents generally believed that their formal qualifications provided the knowledge and skills relevant at the time to become pharmacy technicians. However, the study identified gaps in qualified pharmacy technicians' professional preparation, such as a lack of training in relation to ethical decision making and CPD. Changes to the curriculum to include these subjects could ensure adequate professional preparation of future pharmacy technicians and will help them to become socialised as professionals.¹

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