

# Clinical training for technicians

By Neelam Sharma, BA (hons)

Extended roles for technicians are fundamental to developing the pharmacy profession, but require additional training. One technician shares her experience of completing a certificate in psychiatric therapeutics

**T**he role of the pharmacy technician is constantly evolving. For example, some technicians lead patient education groups and some attend medical ward rounds when the pharmacist is absent. However, the training for these roles is inconsistent — often locally implemented without national recognition — leaving many technicians frustrated that their skills are not fully used.

A few years ago, I was equally frustrated. Despite enjoying my job at a mental health hospital, my role was not providing an adequate challenge. Consequently, I explored the possibility of studying for the certificate in psychiatric therapeutics at Aston University. This certificate (or its subsequent diploma) is often studied by pharmacists and sometimes by nurses who specialise in mental health. Despite the popularity of this qualification, I was surprised to discover that I was the first pharmacy technician to undertake it.

## Enrolling

My first step was to discuss the idea with my manager and the chief pharmacist of my trust. They were both supportive, especially in terms of organising the necessary finance from the trust education budget and the department training budget. I negotiated half a day of protected study time each week and received support from a mentor within the department. I also received encouragement from colleagues, who often suggested literature to aid my study.

The next step was to contact the course tutor at the university, who asked about my current job and qualifications. To qualify for the course, students need to have completed an undergraduate degree (in any subject) and be currently employed in mental healthcare. After receiving a reference from the chief pharmacist, the university allowed me to start the course during the next intake.

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## Course layout

The course at Aston University is delivered by distance learning and consists of six modules and a final exam. Each module includes a multiple-choice test and an assignment.

**Module one** The first module provides an introduction to psychiatry. The assignment requires a published paper or article to be critically appraised. Attending my pharmacy department's journal club was beneficial, because the skills needed to perform critical appraisals improve with practice.

**Module two** The second module examines the principles of drug metabolism and absorption. The assignment requires interpretation of pharmacokinetic profiles of unknown drugs to suggest likely actions and side effects. I found this challenging, having not studied pharmacokinetics before. I completed a lot of background reading and made use of the specialist knowledge of renal and hepatic pharmacists.

**Module three** The third module covers schizophrenia. I found it comparatively straightforward because I had more knowledge of the subject compared with other modules. The assignment requires a case study of a patient suffering from this condition.

**Module four** The fourth module covers mood disorders. I also found this to be straightforward because of my prior knowledge. The assignment offered further practice in completing case studies.

**Module five** This module studies anxiety and sleep disorders. The assignment on "benzodiazepines and z-hypnotics" required more time than any other to complete adequate research. At this point in the course, I did question why I was spending my evenings during the week before Christmas studying at home. However, my results for this assignment were the most rewarding that I received during the course.

**Module six** The final module examines dementia and related disorders. The assignment requires another straightforward case study.

**Final exam** The final exam was open book, for which coursework was included as a reference material. Despite finding the exam difficult, the time I had spent completing case studies and doing background reading proved highly beneficial.

## Was studying worthwhile?

Before undertaking this course, I had not studied by distance learning, and feared that it may be difficult to sustain motivation. However, I quickly realised that motivation was not a problem because the course was so interesting. The greatest challenge was meeting deadlines alongside other work commitments.

Since completing the certificate, my role has become more varied. I now visit a community mental health team (who did not previously receive regular clinical pharmacy input) and assess each patient for drug-related problems. When a problem is identified, I review the patient's clinical notes and pharmacy records to find a solution, or refer the problem to a pharmacist. I also deliver drug education sessions to patient groups and consult with individual patients who have medicine-related concerns.

Overall, I found the course immensely enjoyable and would recommend it to any eligible technician working in mental health who is keen to advance his or her knowledge. For those who have not completed a degree, the modules from this course can be completed without assessment for continuous professional development.

As the role of the technician evolves to take on some of the current duties of the pharmacist, training will be required to ensure quality of service provision. Barriers that prevent technicians from studying postgraduate qualifications must be removed and a national training framework should be implemented to ensure that technicians remain highly trained and motivated to stay in the profession.