

Why pharmacists are needed to help shape students' professional identity

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In the UK, schools of pharmacy in conjunction with the Royal Pharmaceutical Society are responsible for educating and training ever larger numbers of students, so that they are adequately equipped for registration as members of the pharmaceutical profession. As with other such professional courses, admission into the pharmacy profession is not based simply on individuals absorbing a body of facts. If it were, pharmacists could qualify by distance learning. Undertaking a pharmacy degree requires learning a considerable corpus of technical knowledge relating to medicines and acquiring the appropriate attitudes and beliefs appropriate for the application of that knowledge for the public good. Therefore, the training years of any profession involve a process of acculturation — with students being socialised into the behaviours, beliefs and values of the profession.

Values, attitudes, behaviours

Professional socialisation has been described as involving “the transformation of individuals from students to professionals who understand the values, attitudes, and behaviours of the profession deep in their soul. It is an active process that must be nurtured throughout the professional's/student's development. In pharmacy the socialisation process begins the moment a student . . . interacts with pharmacists, evaluates what they do, or actively seeks information about the profession. Beliefs, attitudes and behaviours begin to develop with regard to pharmacists' roles.”¹

While debate about this process in the UK has been largely eclipsed by exhaustive discussions concerning curriculum content, in the US pharmacy student professionalisation is widely discussed and is recognised as a vital component of pharmacy education. Factors that shape students' attitudes and behaviours include their own values, the academic and practice environments they encounter and role models within those environments.

This fostering of a distinct occupational identity is clearly evident in the training of student doctors and nurses in the UK, a significant proportion of which takes place “on the job”. For pharmacy students, professional socialisation only occurs through interaction with those who embody and practise the profession's cultural values. Socialisation, whereby students internalise the “norms” and values of pharmacy is essential in creating the cohesion necessary for an occupational group that, through its relationships with the state and public, will be successful in securing and

retaining a privileged and well remunerated social position.

However, the quality and appropriateness of pharmacy education in preparing students for practice is potentially compromised by the shortage of a pharmacy-trained faculty and a tendency for the bulk of learning to take place in a purely academic environment. Consequently, we recently set out to explore whether, and to what extent, pharmacy students considered themselves to be assimilated into the pharmacy profession during their education, and whether they had encountered pharmacy role models during their courses.² Our interviews, conducted with groups of first- and third-year students at four UK pharmacy schools yielded an interesting snapshot of pharmacy students' perceptions of their role and function.

In the main, pharmacy students perceived their courses as being distinct from a general science degree and tended to identify themselves as pharmacy students rather than just students. Although many recognised the importance of pharmacist educators in their development as professionals, they were acutely aware that many of their lecturers were not pharmacists.

Perhaps more interestingly, academic pharmacists (with whom students have sustained interaction) were considered to be qualitatively different from their professional colleagues in community or hospital practice, whom students tended to label as “real pharmacists”. Students believed the development of a professional identity within their pharmacy school occurred almost exclusively during teaching and learning in pharmacy practice classes where they observed the norms of professional practice. Notably it was the science content, particularly at the beginning of the degree course, that was perceived as distinct, outwith professional practice and a necessary hurdle to be surmounted before students can begin the fabrication of their identity as professionals, later in the course.

With relatively few full-time pharmacists employed by many schools of pharmacy, students' interaction with teacher-practitioners during their education is of pivotal importance. Teacher-practitioners then play a key role in ensuring the appropriateness of the learning experience for contemporary professional practice. Moreover, they have a particular credibility in the eyes of students as they represent “licensed practitioners” able to articulate practice “in the real world” and represent what the students aspire to become: “When we go to pharmacy practice sessions

there are real pharmacists and it is nice to have real health care professionals who are in the field as it were, working with the public.”

Students' exposure to practice settings represents another key opportunity for socialisation during their training, allowing pharmacists to be observed undertaking their professional activities. Such placements are seen by pharmacy schools as being particularly attractive to students, and are actively promoted on websites, prospectuses, etc. Not only do these placements contribute educationally, they also promote professional socialisation and if appropriately managed, students report them to be highly inspirational and motivating.

However, if practice placements are few, are peripheral to the degree programme and simply pay lip service to professional practice, they become little more than cosmetic window dressing and, crucially, a missed opportunity for professional acculturation: “We've had two days in the first year and two days in the second year and a week in a hospital in the third year. That wasn't so vocational; it was really a day out.”

Crucial to student development

Professional socialisation is crucial to pharmacy students' development and cannot, and should not be neglected as a secondary concern divorced from, and subsequent to scientific or indeed clinical knowledge. Responsibility for professional socialisation rests with the students, pharmacy school teaching staff and practitioners who interact with the students. Too often this process is woefully inadequate. Students receive ambiguous messages about what comprises professional practice during their undergraduate years and consequently feel inadequately trained for the environment in which they will practise. Pharmacists, both those responsible for student education and those interacting with students in practice placements, and during vocational employment are role models, embodying the attitudes, values and behaviours expected of students as nascent professionals, and need to be actively involved in shaping a professional identity.

References

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