

Pharmacy

Technicians and assistants

by Nancy Saffer

In the past, a pharmacist probably filled the prescriptions you ordered. Today, although pharmacists are on duty wherever medications are dispensed, a pharmacy technician or pharmacy assistant often does most of the work in preparing and selling prescriptions.

The role of pharmacy technicians and assistants has changed for a number of reasons. One reason is that using these workers minimizes health care costs. Another is that because pharmacy technicians and assistants handle routine work, pharmacists are able to focus more on supervisory duties and patient care and advice.

This article describes what pharmacy technicians and assistants do, as well as where they work, what their job outlook is, how much they earn, and how they train for these careers.

Nature of the work

Pharmacy technicians and assistants help licensed pharmacists in providing medication and health care to patients. They



In the world of pharmacy, it's increasingly the technicians and assistants who are minding the store. Here's a profile of these two health-related occupations.



prepare prescribed medication for patients and perform clerical tasks. Although their duties are often similar, technicians usually have more responsibilities than assistants.

Laws vary by State, but most States require the work of technicians and assistants to be closely supervised by pharmacists. Pharmacists must check every prescription technicians prepare before it can be given to a patient. And any questions regarding prescriptions, drug information, or health matters are directed to a pharmacist.

Pharmacy technicians. Pharmacy technicians follow a procedure for filling prescriptions. After receiving patients' written

prescriptions or requests for prescription refills, they verify that the information on the prescription is complete and accurate. Then, technicians retrieve, count, pour, weigh, measure, and, if necessary, mix the medication for the prescription. Next, they prepare the prescription labels, select a prescription container, and affix the prescription and other labels to the container. Once the prescription is filled, technicians price and file it. Technicians also establish and maintain patient profiles and prepare insurance claim forms.

In retail settings, technicians also stock and take inventory of prescription and over-the-counter medications, clean and help maintain equipment, and manage the cash register in addition to their other duties.

In hospitals, technicians read physician orders on patients' charts and prepare and deliver medication after it is checked by a pharmacist. They also enter information about prescribed medications into patients' medical records. They may assemble a 24-hour supply of medicine for every patient, packaging and labeling each dose separately. Each package is checked by the supervising pharmacist before being given to a patient. Like their counterparts in retail establishments, pharmacy technicians in hospitals keep an inventory of the medicines and other supplies they use.

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The duties of pharmacy technicians have changed recently, along with those of pharmacists. "Pharmacists are becoming more focused on patient care, so pharmacy technicians are needed to perform more of the distributive functions," says Melissa Murer, Executive Director of the Pharmacy Technician Certification Board.

And with technicians concentrating on preparing and dispensing medication, pharmacists have more time for patient consultation. "Preparing the work for the pharmacist is the most important duty of a pharmacy technician," says Jennifer Corley, a Certified Pharmacy Technician in Haltom City, Texas. "This frees up the pharmacist to spend more time counseling patients and less time behind the counter."

Pharmacy assistants. Some hospitals and pharmacies employ pharmacy assistants, whose duties may be similar to those of technicians. Pharmacy assistants in retail pharmacies often work as clerks or cashiers. They may answer phones, handle money, and perform clerical functions. Assistants who work in hospitals deliver medication to patients. They also assist in the hospital pharmacy with duties such as stocking shelves.

Employment and working conditions

In 1996, pharmacy technicians and assistants held about 130,000 jobs—82,000 pharmacy technicians and 47,000 pharmacy assistants. Over two-thirds worked in retail trade, mainly in retail pharmacies; about a quarter worked in hospitals; and most of the rest worked in other health-related settings such as clinics and nursing homes.

Pharmacy technicians and assistants work in clean, organized, well-lighted, and well-ventilated areas. They spend most of the workday on their feet. Technicians and assistants may be required to lift boxes weighing up to 40 pounds and may



Pharmacy technicians prepare routine prescriptions under the supervision of a pharmacist.

have to use a stepladder to retrieve supplies from high shelves. They may also experience stress during busy periods.

Because prescriptions must be filled whenever a pharmacy is open—which, in the case of hospitals and 24-hour pharmacies, means almost any time—technicians and assistants often work evenings, nights, and weekends. There are many opportunities for part-time work in 24-hour pharmacies. Some technicians and assistants work part time while studying to become pharmacists.

Job outlook

Employment of pharmacy technicians and assistants is expected to increase about as fast as the average for all occupations through 2006, for several reasons. Technicians are cost effective for retail es-

tablishments and hospitals, since they are paid less than pharmacists. Also, pharmacy workloads—and, consequently, the demand for technicians—are increasing because of society's growing population of older people, who are more likely to need prescription medication than people in other age groups. Employment of pharmacy assistants likewise will grow as assistants take over some duties of higher-paid pharmacists and pharmacy technicians.

Traditionally, States have required a ratio of one pharmacist to every technician, but that is also expected to change. "Many of the major employers of technicians are expanding the number of their facilities, and boards of pharmacy in some States are allowing the legal ratio of technicians to pharmacists to expand," says



The duties of pharmacy technicians and assistants vary according to their work setting.

Mark Boesen, Director of Government and Student Affairs for the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy. "This is a very promising field to work in." Increased demand for technician services and greater responsibility have resulted in some States approving an increase to two or three technicians per pharmacist.

In addition to jobs created by employment growth, many jobs for pharmacy technicians and assistants will result from the need to replace workers who transfer to other occupations or leave the labor force. And as mentioned above, there will be plenty of opportunities for part-time work.

As they take on more tasks previously done by pharmacists, pharmacy technicians must learn and master new pharmacy technology as it becomes available. Some pharmacies use robotic machines to dispense medicine into containers, but technicians are still hired to oversee the machine, stock bins, and label containers.

In other words, automation is not expected to replace technicians.

Earnings

There are no Bureau of Labor Statistics wage data for pharmacy technicians and assistants. Based on the limited data available, pay appears to vary by geographic location and employer. According to estimates from experts in the field, technicians employed in retail pharmacies earn between \$5 and \$8 per hour, and those working in hospitals start at about \$7 to \$9 per hour. Some hospitals pay more to technicians who work evenings, nights, or weekends.

Experienced technicians may earn as much as \$10 to \$14 per hour, and technicians with certification are likely to be paid the most. "Hospitals are offering higher salaries to technicians who are certified," says Don Ballington, Director of the pharmacy technician program at Midlands Technical College in Columbia,

South Carolina. "Certified technicians are also given the first opportunity to advance to a higher position." More information about certification is in the next section.

Depending on geographic location, pay for pharmacy assistants ranges from minimum wage, currently \$5.15 per hour, to \$6.50 per hour.

Most retail pharmacies and hospitals also provide benefits. These include paid vacation and sick leave, medical and dental insurance, and retirement plans. Some employers pay overtime to technicians and assistants who work on holidays.

Qualifications, training, and certification

People who want to become pharmacy technicians and assistants should be proficient in basic subjects such as mathematics, spelling, and reading. A strong background in chemistry and health education is also recommended. Some employers may prefer to hire people with experience in typing, handling money, or operating special equipment. Pharmacy technicians cannot have prior records of drug or substance abuse.

Technicians and assistants must be alert, observant, organized, honest, and responsible; have good manual dexterity; and be able to perform repetitious work accurately. They need good interpersonal and communication skills because of their frequent interaction with patients, coworkers, and health care professionals. Technicians and assistants must be able to work as part of a team. Ability to take direction is also important, but technicians and assistants should be able to work on their own without constant instruction from a pharmacist.

There are few State and no Federal requirements for formal training of pharmacy technicians and assistants. Most pharmacy technicians and assistants receive informal on-the-job training. But many employers—especially those who cannot invest the time or money required for on-the-job training—prefer to hire

technicians who have completed formal training.

Pharmacy technician education programs involve both classroom and laboratory work in subjects such as medical and pharmaceutical terminology, pharmaceutical calculations, pharmacy record keeping, pharmaceutical techniques, and pharmacy law and ethics. Technicians must learn medication names, actions, uses, and doses. Students who successfully complete requirements receive a diploma, certificate, or associate degree, depending on the program.

The American Society of Health-System Pharmacists has accredited more than 50 programs for pharmacy technician education. Formal training programs are offered by some hospitals as well as proprietary schools, vocational and technical colleges, community colleges, and colleges of pharmacy. The Society also offers an accredited program that requires 600 hours of training.

Pharmacy technicians may also demonstrate professional competency by earning certification. The Pharmacy Technician Certification Board administers the National Pharmacy Technician Certification Examination, a standardized test of knowledge and skills required for pharmacy technicians. The exam covers three function areas: Assisting the pharmacist in serving patients, medication distribution and inventory control systems, and pharmacy operations. The cost is \$105. About 20,000 pharmacy technicians were certified in 1996, according to the Board.

To be eligible for the certification exam, candidates must have a high school diploma or equivalent. Individuals who pass the exam earn the title of Certified Pharmacy Technician.

Like formal training, certification is not required for pharmacy technicians. However, being certified does provide advantages. "Allowing technicians to become certified is one way for them to formalize their career—they feel like part of a health-care team," says the Board's Mel-



Pharmacy technicians and assistants stock and take inventory of prescription and over-the-counter drugs.

issa Murer. "Certification also gives employers a sense of retention and recruitment in their employees." Results of a 1994 Board survey confirm that assertion. Surveyed technicians cited better wages, job opportunities, and job security, along with improved self-worth and competence, as a result of earning certification.

Jennifer Corley is among the certified technicians who support certification. "Since technicians are being handed more and more responsibilities, there is a need to have formally educated and well qualified people," she says. "When I passed the certification exam, I got a \$1 per hour raise. I also gained more recognition and respect for my work."

Certified technicians must be recertified every 2 years. Recertification requires completion of 20 "contact" hours—defined as class time or training received in addition to usual duties—of pharmacy-related topics within the 2-year certification period. At least 1 hour must be in the area of pharmacy law. Technicians can earn contact hours from sources such as pharmacy associations, pharmacy colleges, and pharmacy technician training programs. A technician working under the direct supervision and instruction of a pharmacist can earn up to 10 contact hours.

In contrast to the formal training and certification available to technicians,

pharmacy assistants are almost always trained on the job. Pharmacy assistants might start out observing a more experienced worker. After becoming familiar with hospital or store equipment, policies, and procedures, they are able to work on their own. Assistants are not likely to receive additional training unless their employer introduces new equipment or changes policies or procedures.

Working in a community pharmacy or volunteering in a hospital is helpful for someone interested in becoming a pharmacy technician or assistant. Other jobs that may prove useful include work that involves checking inventories, counting, measuring, and using a computer. Many pharmacy technician training programs include clerkships or internships, which provide opportunities for hands-on experience in pharmacies.

Related occupations

Workers in other medical support occupations include medical secretaries, hospital admitting clerks, dental assistants, medical record clerks, occupational therapy assistants and aides, licensed nursing aides, surgical technologists, and physical therapy assistants and aides.

For more information

For information on certification and recertification or to receive a National Pharmacy Technician Certification Examination Candidate Handbook, contact:

Pharmacy Technician Certification
Board
2215 Constitution Ave., NW.
Washington, DC 20037-2985
(202) 429-7576
www.ptcb.org

For a directory of accredited pharmacy technician programs, contact:

American Society of Health-System
Pharmacists
7272 Wisconsin Ave.
Bethesda, MD 20814
(301) 657-3000

