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Pharmacy Technician - A Closer Look

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Summary:

In the not so distant past when you walked into a pharmacy needing to get a prescription filled you would have, in most instances, found that your prescription was actually filled by the on duty pharmacists. However, over the past few years a change has occurred in the pharmacist arena and that change is, "a pharmacist probably no longer filling your prescriptions". Although pharmacists are on duty wherever medications are dispensed; today in most instances, a pharmacy techni...

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In the not so distant past when you walked into a pharmacy needing to get a prescription filled you would have, in most instances, found that your prescription was actually filled by the on duty pharmacists. However, over the past few years a change has occurred in the pharmacist arena and that change is, "a pharmacist probably no longer filling your prescriptions". Although pharmacists are on duty wherever medications are dispensed; today in most instances, a pharmacy technician or pharmacy assistant are the ones filling prescriptions.

Pharmacy Technicians and assistants have existed for some time but their roles have evolved for a variety of reasons.

A big reason is that they help to reduce health care costs because they get paid much less than a certified pharmacist. Another important reason is that it simply makes sense. Pharmacy technicians and assistants are trained to handle routine work (fill prescriptions and customer service), which frees up the pharmacists to focus more of their time on supervisory duties, as well as patient care.

Melissa Murer, Executive Director of the Pharmacy Technician Certification Board, put it this way, "Pharmacists are becoming more focused on patient care, so pharmacy technicians are needed to perform more of the distributive functions."

In this brief (but hopefully informative article) I attempt to demonstrate what pharmacy technician and assistants do and where they do it.

In general, they assist licensed pharmacists in providing medication and health care to patients by preparing and filling prescriptions and performing clerical tasks. Duties are similar but pharmacy technicians generally have more responsibilities. In addition, technicians and assistants are required to be closely supervised by a licensened pharmacist, although the laws defining what "being supervised" entails, varies by state.

In addition to having all of their prescriptions checked by a pharmacist, technicians and assistants must also direct all patient questions regarding drug information, health matters or prescriptions to the pharmacist.

Pharmacy Technicians

Technicians follow specific procedures when filling prescriptions. After receiving an initial prescription or refill request, they must verify that the prescription information is accurate and then count, pour, retrieve, weigh, measure and if necessary, mix the required medication for the prescription. The next step is to prepare and affix the labels to the proper container. After filling the prescription the technician will then price and file it. Another important aspect of a technician's job is to prepare patient insurance forms and establish and maintain patient profiles.

In retail pharmacies, technicians will also stock and take inventory of medications (both prescription and over-the-counter) maintain equipment and help manage the till.

In many hospitals, technicians have the responsibility to read the doctors orders from a patients' chart, prepare and then deliver the medication after it's been checked by a pharmacist. They may also enter information about patients' medical records (regarding their medications) or put together a supply (normally 24 hours) of medicine for patients, including the labeling and packaging of each dose. But just like technicians working in a retail pharmacy, each package is checked by the supervising pharmacist before being given to a patient and they also maintain inventories of medicine and other supplies.

Pharmacy Assistants

Duties are similar to pharmacy technicians and while hospitals and pharmacies employ pharmacy assistants, the number of available positions is generally less than technicians. In retail pharmacies they work as clerks or cashiers, answer phones, handle money and perform clerical duties. In hospitals they also deliver medications and assist in stocking shelves.

Pharmacy technicians and assistants work in clean well-organized areas but are required to spend most of their workday on their feet. And because more and more pharmacies are open 24-hours a day work hours can vary with technicians and assistants are often required to work odds hours (nights, evenings and weekends). Therefore, there are many opportunities to work part-time in 24-hour pharmacies. In addition, a percentage of both technicians and assistants work part time because they are studying to become pharmacists.

States have traditionally required a one-to-one ratio of pharmacist to technician but that is also expected to change. Mark Boesen, Director of Government and Student Affairs for the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy, has stated that: "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. This is a very promising field to work in."

An increasing demand for technicians with greater responsibility has prompted some States to revise their one-to-one ratio of pharmacist to technician to two or three technicians per pharmacist.

As pharmacy technicians take on more and more tasks previously performed by pharmacists, they must also learn and master new technology. A good example is the increased use (by many pharmacies) of robotic machines to dispense medicines. Technicians will be required to oversee the machine, stock bins and label containers.

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