

Wheel of Pharmacy Technician Career Opportunities: How to Hit the Jackpot

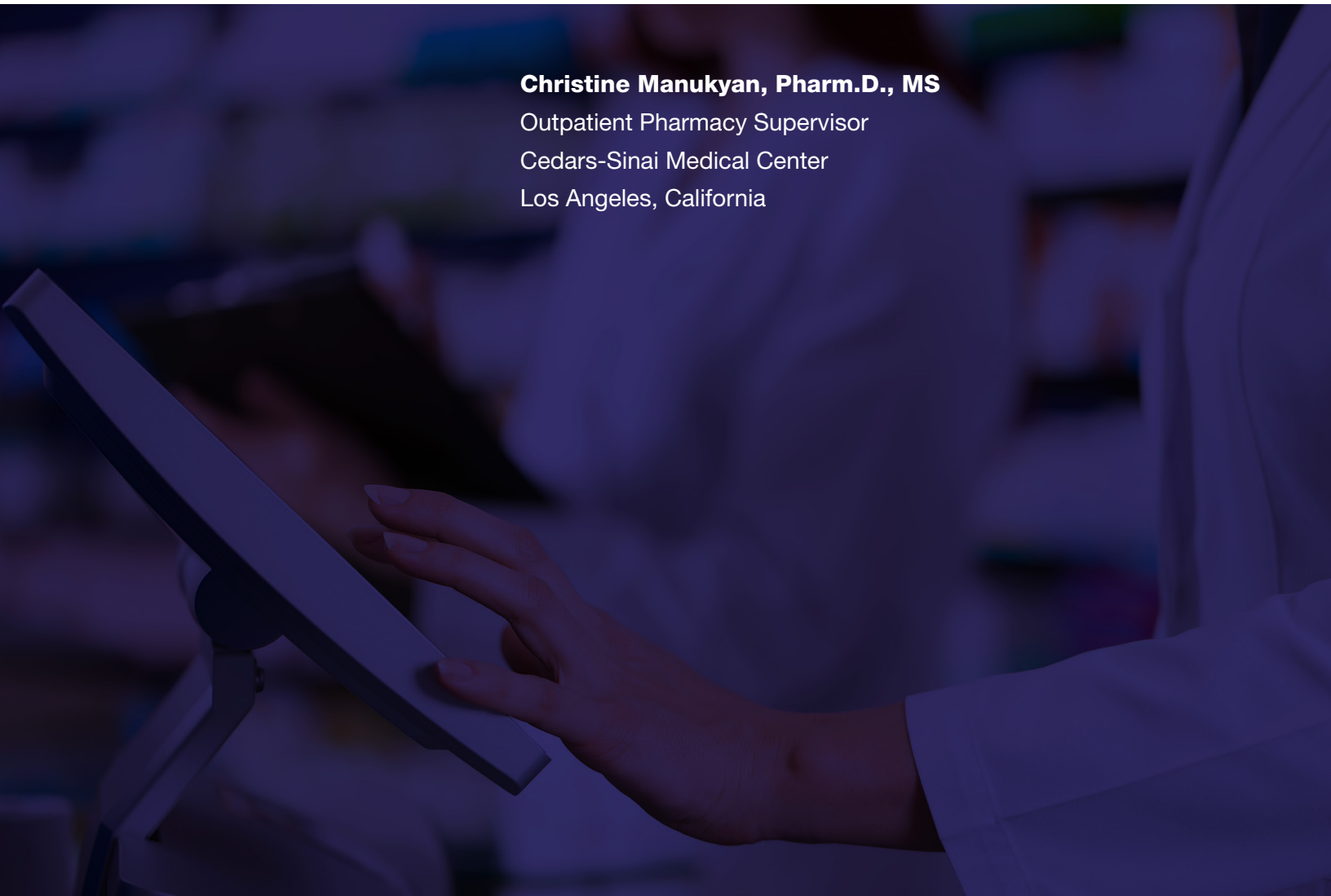


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Release date: December 15, 2013

Expiration date: October 23, 2016

Target Audience

This continuing pharmacy education program was planned to meet the needs of pharmacy technicians in a variety of settings, and would be particularly beneficial for pharmacy technicians, supervisors, and educators who are interested in learning about career development.

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Executive Summary

Pharmacy technicians are an integral part of the pharmacy team and assist pharmacists in tasks ranging from filling prescriptions to compounding and many other duties. This activity will highlight the skills and training needed to keep up with the evolving role of pharmacy technicians.

As the scope of practice differs from state to state and between practice environments, technicians must be well versed in meeting the needs of the pharmacy team and, more importantly, meeting the needs of the patients in each setting. Faculty will highlight the impact of successful and innovative pharmacy technician roles in medication safety and compliance, transitions of care, automation, investigational drug service, and others.

Learning Objectives

At the conclusion of this knowledge-based continuing education activity, participants should be able to

- Explain how pharmacy technicians' scope of practice and regulations vary among states.
- Identify resources for pharmacy technician education and training.
- Describe innovative roles of pharmacy technicians.

A pharmacy technician is an individual who, under the direct supervision and control of a pharmacist, performs non-discretionary tasks.¹ According to a 2009 survey by the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy, the term “pharmacy technician” is used in the laws and regulations of 47 states.² However, some states refer to pharmacy technicians as “unlicensed personnel” (Colorado), “ancillary personnel” (District of Columbia), “pharmaceutical technicians” (New York), “unlicensed person” (North Dakota), “registered pharmacy technician” (Wyoming), and “qualified pharmacy technician” (Ohio).

Scope of Practice

The scope of practice varies from state to state, but pharmacy technicians typically perform the following duties¹:

- Assist pharmacists in labeling and filling prescriptions (inpatient and outpatient dispensing)
- Assist patients in dropping off and picking up prescriptions
- Enter prescription information into the computer
- Compound oral solutions, ointments, creams, and IV medications
- Prepackage bulk medications
- Assist with medication ordering, purchasing, and billing
- Work with insurance carriers to obtain payments and refilling authority
- Pharmacy technicians in the U.S. Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, and Navy can dispense medications under the supervision of pharmacists

Within their scope of practice, pharmacy technicians are not allowed to perform the following tasks¹:

- Override computer alerts without first notifying the pharmacist
- Transfer prescriptions from one pharmacy to another pharmacy
- Receive new verbal prescriptions
- Verify dosage and directions
- Provide patient counseling

The current landscape for pharmacy technicians is positive. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) in the U.S. Department of Labor estimated that there were 334,400 pharmacy technician jobs in the U.S. in 2010. Employment for pharmacy technicians is expected to grow by at least 32% through the year 2020, which is much faster than the average for all occupations.³ Figure 1 depicts the number of technicians per state certified by the Pharmacy Technician Certification Board (PTCB) at the end of 2012.

Job opportunities for pharmacy technicians exist in a wide variety of work settings, including community pharmacies, hospitals, the military, home health care settings, long-term care facilities, mail order pharmacies, managed care organizations, companies specializing in automation and inventory management, insurance agencies, and educational programs. Many responsibilities and characteristics of a technician's job are unique to a specific work environment. For example, a hospital technician will interact with many other health care providers and will be expected to work a variety of shifts including weekends and holidays. Technicians who work in community pharmacy positions will be directly involved in customer service, interacting with patients as they pick up their prescriptions. Long-term care facilities are considered closed-door pharmacies that exist to provide medications and other services to patients within that particular facility. Technicians may not have direct patient interactions but will fill many prescriptions. Technicians who work at insurance companies typically perform clerical duties rather than handling prescriptions and

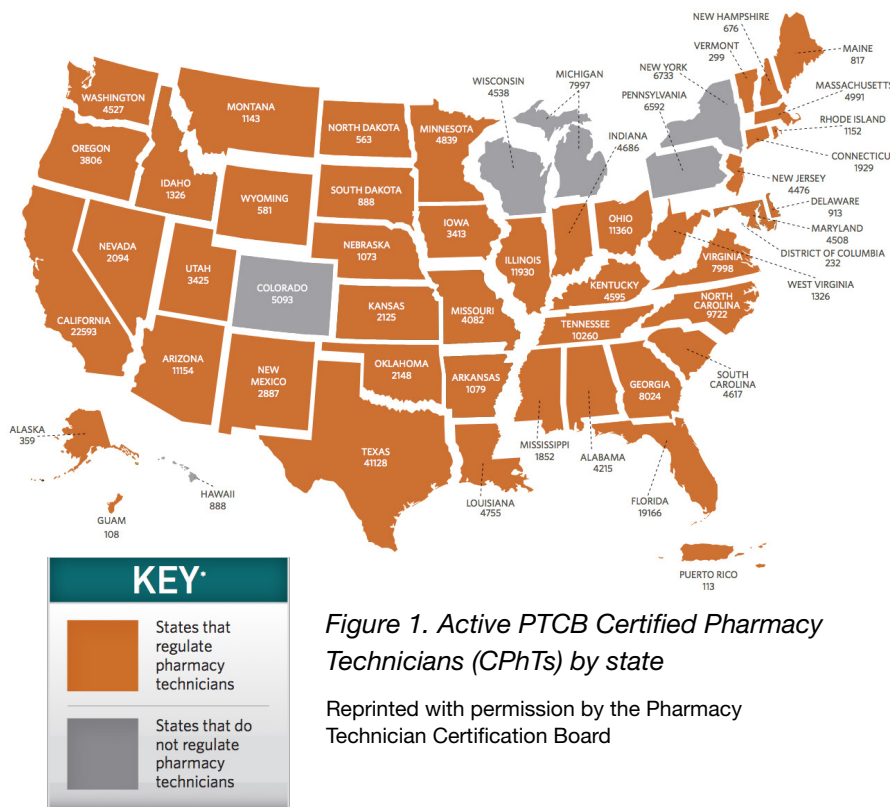


Figure 1. Active PTCB Certified Pharmacy Technicians (CPhTs) by state

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dealing with patients. Technicians help to determine if patients and providers meet necessary qualifications for insurance approval.

Pharmacy practice models are constantly being redesigned to meet patient needs.⁴ Many models include freeing up pharmacists for more clinical roles, usually by training pharmacy technicians to perform non-clinical tasks. This training includes a combination of education in the workplace and specialized training and education. Expanding pharmacy technician roles lead to greater job opportunities in the workplace.



Reflective Question 1

Most states allow each pharmacist to supervise more than ____ technicians.

- A. Five
- B. There is no limit on number of technicians
- C. All of the above
- D. None of the above

Training

Requirements for pharmacy technicians differ from state to state. Just over half of the states require technicians to be registered or licensed. Some states set minimum age, education, and training requirements, and check for a criminal record.

Since there is no national standard for pharmacy technician education and training in the U.S, it is important to select a comprehensive training program. Before committing to a program, a pharmacy technician should ensure that the program offers at least the following⁵:

- Training in pharmaceutical compounding, pharmacology, drug distribution, pharmaceutical law and ethics and in-depth knowledge about the industry
- Adequate training time (anywhere between 6 months to 2 years)
- An externship —experience in a working pharmacy
- Assistance with student financing
- Job placement assistance

The American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP) is the leading national accrediting body specifically for Pharmacy Technician Training Programs (since 1983).⁶ ASHP accreditation assures standardized education and training, and provides a credibility and competitive advantage over other programs. A directory of accredited training programs is available on the ASHP website.

According to Janie March, CPhT, B.S., the Director of the Pharmacy Technician Program at Carver Career and Technical Education Center in Charleston, West Virginia, “ASHP Accreditation sets a high national standard for all pharmacy technicians across the board. With this training, students will be able to function in any location, and in any state.”⁶

In-depth educational programs are being instituted to standardize training for pharmacy technicians. North Carolina’s vision is to expand pharmacy technician roles via a two-year Associate of Applied Science (AAS) degree program in Pharmacy Technology, developed by health-system pharmacies in collaboration with community colleges and PTCB.⁷



Reflective Question 2

Technicians’ scope of practice is regulated by

- A. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA)
- B. The Joint Commission (TJC)
- C. State Board of Pharmacy
- D. All of the above

The program was designed to support the development of highly skilled pharmacy technician workforces in North Carolina’s evolving health care system.

Certification

There are currently two certification examinations for pharmacy technicians accredited by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA). The ExCPT is a retail-oriented Exam for the Certification of Pharmacy Technicians offered by the Institute for the Certification of Pharmacy Technicians (ICPT). The Pharmacy Technician Certification Board (PTCB) examination is more widely recognized than ExCPT and is endorsed by ASHP.⁴ Approximately 25% of hospitals currently require newly hired pharmacy technicians to be PTCB certified.



Reflective Question 3

Many organizations (hospitals and community pharmacies) require technicians to be

- A. Advanced Cardiovascular Life Support (ACLS) certified
- B. Pharmacy Technician Certification Board (PTCB) certified
- C. Board Certified Pharmacotherapy Specialist (BCPS) certified

In 2011, PTCB launched the C.R.E.S.T. initiative to gather input from the profession about advancing the work of pharmacy technicians and the future of the PTCB Certification Program. The summit focused on the areas of:

- Consumer awareness
- Resources
- Education
- State policy
- Testing

relating to pharmacy technicians.⁸ Attendees included pharmacists, Certified Pharmacy Technicians (CPhTs), educators, major employers, State Boards of Pharmacy, and representatives from state and national pharmacy organizations.

Recommendations from the summit include eligibility requirements for the PTCB Certification Program, requirements for recertification, and the creation of new specialty certification programs.

Career Planning

Career planning begins with the awareness of the need to make a choice.⁹ The next steps involve identifying options, gathering information, and comparing options. After making a choice, the technician may need to get additional education and training in order to get the job.

There are a number of ways in which pharmacy technicians can proactively seek career change and advancement. Career opportunities may exist within the current organization, so it is important to ensure that your supervisor or manager knows about your interest in career advancement. Volunteering to work with the management team on new initiatives and pilot studies indicates that a technician is motivated to achieve higher goals.

For example, the hospital may have set a goal to reduce 30-day readmissions. The pharmacy department may decide to start a pilot program targeting discharge patients with the goal of having patients get their prescriptions filled at the time of discharge from the hospital. This is a good opportunity for a technician to volunteer to contribute to a pilot program.

Gaining extra certifications can differentiate the technician interested in career advancement. Examples include:

- Six Sigma
- Basic Life Support
- Leadership training
- Sterile and non-sterile compounding

Involvement in state and national pharmacy associations may lead to new career opportunities. Whenever possible, technicians should try to attend state and national meetings of organizations such as the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP), American Pharmacists Association (APhA), and Academy of Managed Care Pharmacy (AMCP). These meetings provide a wealth of networking opportunities as well as information about state and national matters that affect the pharmacy profession.

In many hospitals, there is an increased focus on safety, regulatory compliance, automation, transitions of care, sterile compounding, and drug shortages. Pharmacy technicians are filling advanced and specialized roles that enable pharmacists to allocate their time to other initiatives, providing a cost savings for the pharmacy department.

Examples in Action: Cedars Sinai Specialty Pharmacy Technician Roles

Innovative specialized pharmacy technician roles have been created at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. This section of the monograph will describe the responsibilities of some of their specialty technicians, including:

- Medication safety and compliance technician
- Inpatient transitions of care technician
- Outpatient transitions of care technician
- Inpatient automation technician
- Outpatient automation technician
- Investigational drug services technician

Medication safety and compliance technician

This technician works closely with the Medication Safety Coordinator and Pharmacy Compliance Coordinator. He is responsible for inpatient, outpatient, and hospital outpatient departments such as the Emergency Department and Catheterization Lab.

He monitors drug recalls from the board of pharmacy, FDA, manufacturers, and wholesalers. When a recall notice is received, he works with the staff to retrieve recalled products from all patient areas and to maintain recall documentation.

He maintains the medication safety and regulatory website, which serves as a resource for the pharmacy department as well as institution.

The technician coordinates inspections by assigning staff to inspection areas to check for expired medications. He maintains documentation for all inspections and shares that information with the Medication Safety and Compliance Pharmacist.

Inpatient transitions of care technician

The inpatient transitions of care technician facilitates the compilation of an up-to-date list of a patient's medications upon admission to the hospital. Medication reconciliation is the process of collecting the most accurate list of all medications that the patient is taking, including the name, dosage, frequency, and route, by comparing the medical record to an external list of medications obtained from a patient, hospital, or other provider(s). The purpose is to obtain a complete, accurate medication list, with last doses taken, to continue to provide patient care and to determine formulary alternatives for a patient's home regimen for treatment during hospitalization.¹⁰ The medication list is generated from many different sources such as doctors' offices, hospitals, outpatient pharmacies, home health agencies, and skilled nursing facilities. Compiling an accurate medication list may be challenging, but is essential to prevent patient harm. Figure 2 illustrates the complexity of this process.

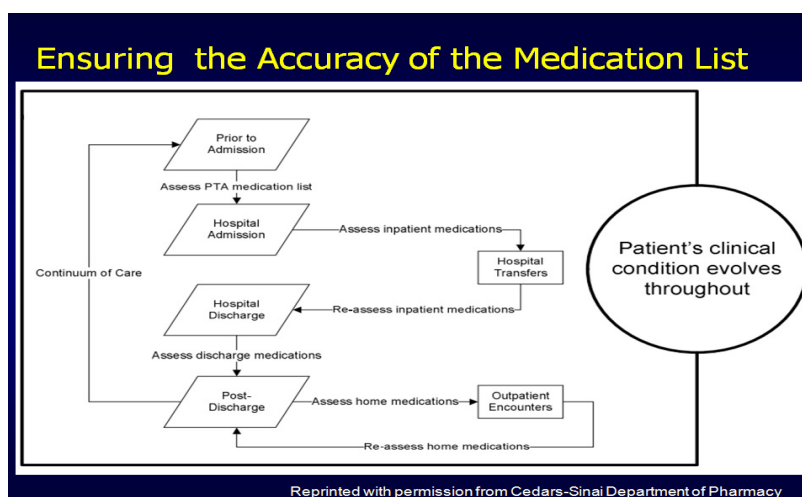


Figure 2. Ensuring the accuracy of the medication list.

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Accurate medication histories are particularly important for high risk patients, including

- Emergency department patients who are being admitted
- Hospitalists' patients (patients seen by hospital specialists)
- Patients with congestive heart failure (CHF)
- Patients admitted from skilled nursing facilities (SNFs)

Outpatient transitions of care technician:

The technician responsible for outpatient transitions of care works with nurses, pharmacists, inpatient patient care technicians (PCTs), physicians, and social workers to facilitate discharge prescriptions. This technician is responsible for billing insurance, processing and filling prescriptions, and coordinating medication deliveries to the patient. He works with social workers to ensure that patients have their medications before they are discharged, which helps to reduce the number of patients readmitted within 30 days of discharge. Currently, almost 20 percent of hospitalized Medicare patients are readmitted to the hospital within 30 days.¹¹

Inpatient automation technician

The inpatient automation technician monitors and adjusts automated dispensing cabinet (ADC) inventory to optimized stock levels based on usage. He manages the configuration and rollout of new automation by assessing inventory needs, configuring devices, loading devices, testing functionality, and assuring that data is accurately loaded. He coordinates with pharmacists to install the new devices. The technician incorporates Pharmacy and Therapeutics (P&T) Committee decisions into each automation system as appropriate. He assists in the development of clinical rules and alerts relating to medication use. He ensures that the pharmacy information system integrates with pharmacy automation, identifies and resolves problems or areas needing improvement, and acts as a problem-solving liaison for pharmacy automated systems. He processes narcotic discrepancies and investigates and reports medication errors, taking steps to prevent future errors. The inpatient automation technician at Cedars-Sinai assisted with the implementation of their new Barcode Medication Administration (BCMA) system.

Outpatient automation technician

Cedars-Sinai also has a pharmacy technician dedicated to automation issues in the outpatient setting. He is responsible for troubleshooting and maintaining automation such as the robot that counts and labels medications, the medication storage: pick-to-light inventory control system, and the will-call system. This technician works with the pharmacy supervisor to maintain pharmacy inventory.

Investigational drug services technician

Investigational drug studies are highly regulated, requiring precise recordkeeping, labeling, and dispensing. The investigational drug services technician works with the investigational drug pharmacist to manage the medications for patients participating in clinical trials. He prepares, delivers, and distributes investigational medications to appropriate care areas or patient locations. He is responsible for labeling, pack-

aging, and obtaining medication and preparing it for distribution. He may also mail research medications to other facilities, patients, or back to the sponsor. He manages the inventory control functions of study medications, monitors the supply to prevent study shortages, and performs reconciliation of medications returned and not used in research studies.

This technician performs extemporaneous compounding under the supervision of a pharmacist, following quality control and documentation requirements for research studies. He calculates, prepares, documents, and labels investigational drugs per study protocol.

He works with research study sponsors and study team members, coordinating initial and subsequent visits by the sponsor. The technician manages a large amount of paperwork. He participates in gathering data for Pharmacy Research Agreement budget documents and organizes protocol binders and research related files.

The technician also provides direct database management and computes statistical reports throughout the study. He reconciles workload and billing reports against study records, prepares monthly research billing by study, and conducts audits of research locations for compliance with regulatory agencies.

The investigational drug technician assists in the orientation of pharmacy staff to new protocols and prepares standard operating procedures (SOPs) for integration of studies into day-to-day operations.

Summary

There are many differences among states in the training requirements and scope of practice for technicians. There is a need for standardized pharmacy technician education and formalized competency-based training programs to ensure that all pharmacy technicians are competent to perform the essential tasks required of them.

Pharmacy department leadership should consider using pharmacy technicians to their fullest potential to allow pharmacists to take on more clinical responsibilities. They should provide opportunities for expanding and creating new technician roles.

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Answers to Reflective Questions—1: D, 2: C, 2: B