

Barriers and enablers to the pharmacy technician profession



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Introduction

Situation

The pharmacy technician profession is in its infancy, with registration only becoming mandatory in 2011. Many registrants went through a grandparenting clause to gain access to the register and have had little in the way of professional socialisation.

The GPhC Standards for Pharmacy Professionals applies to both pharmacists and pharmacy technicians but unlike pharmacist, pharmacy technicians are not required to sit a registration assessment to gain access to the register.

The role of the pharmacy technician is developing at pace and it is recognised that for the pharmacist profession to grow and develop to meet its optimal potential, there is a need for the pharmacy technician profession to be able to do the same.

Background

To increase the GPhC's understanding of whether there are things they as a regulator, and/or others, could do, or not do, to support the pharmacy technician profession as it continues to advance to meet the future needs of pharmacy and the public they sought views of pharmacy technicians to establish:

- how they perceive the recognition of their profession;
- their level of awareness and understanding of the standards for pharmacy professionals;
- what the barriers and enablers are in their practical application of the standards.

Focus groups were carried out in England, Scotland and Wales with a total of 78 participants spread across the sectors. There were also an additional 8 that participated via an online survey.

Assessment

Research findings

The participants themselves had a very clear understanding of the meaning and purpose of the standards for pharmacy professionals, but there was also recognition that some of their peers did not.

The responses to barriers and enablers were collated and coded and the outcomes fit into 4 main themes:

- Lack of/ or understanding and acceptance of the profession
- Lack of/or availability of funding training and career pathway
- Lack of/or opportunities and support to develop the profession
- Process and legislation

Understanding and acceptance of the profession

Table 1: Understanding and acceptance of the profession

Barriers	Enablers
Perception of professional responsibilities	Improve education about professional responsibilities of both professions to both professions
Description of role doesn't reflect practice	Update role definition to reflect practice
Disparity in roles between sectors	Recognise and consider disparity in roles between sectors
Not respected as professionals	Change language used to 'pharmacy professions'
Have to over-prove competence	Increase pharmacy technicians input with the GPhC
Overruled by pharmacist (Responsible Pharmacist role)	Engage directly with pharmacy technicians
Not used to full potential	Treat pharmacy technicians as professionals

Perception of professional responsibilities, this was the perception of pharmacy technicians themselves and also others perception of them.

The description of the role is outdated and doesn't reflect current practice. Particularly those in the primary and secondary care groups felt the current description really describes the role of a pharmacy support worker or dispenser and not a pharmacy technician.

The disparity in roles between sectors doesn't help with the understanding and acceptance of the profession as they are so different depending on the sector. People's perception tends to be formed from their own personal experience, so where they've worked and who with is the basis of their understanding of the pharmacy technician role.

It is accepted that it's not easy to describe the role, pharmacy technicians themselves struggle because it is so diverse and is developing in lots of different directions. Some people felt the title 'pharmacy technician' also causes confusion because many aspects of the role are not necessarily 'technical'. But regardless of title there's a real need to get away from using task-based descriptions to describe the role and move to a high-level overarching statement that fits cross sector. For example, a pharmacist can be described as an expert in medicines, whatever sector or role this underpins what they do and is fundamentally a unique selling point.

Not being respected as professionals and having to over-prove competence came up regularly.

Being overruled by Pharmacist in a responsible pharmacist role can be a barrier to pharmacy technicians working in community pharmacy. Examples given of individuals practicing as accuracy checking technicians and carrying out management roles within the pharmacy on a day to day basis but when the regular pharmacist was on leave and a locum came in, the locum could demote the pharmacy technician to basic dispensing duties as they didn't trust their competence.

Which leads to not being used to full potential, other examples included being trained to undertake a role such as smoking cessation but not being permitted to practice as it was the pharmacists that carried out that role. Also feeling like there was much more they could do but were constrained because the pharmacist was reluctant to give up relevant roles.

Improving education about both professions to both professions, there is one set of standards for pharmacy professionals and pharmacy technicians are equally responsible and accountable for their actions and omissions, but this is not necessarily recognised. Potentially the fact that there are different standards to get on to the register and pharmacy technicians don't have to sit an exam may exacerbate the issue.

There are two professions that sit in the pharmacy family so by simply changing the language used to the pharmacy professions rather than profession it shows that recognition.

The participants felt there is a lack of understanding and acknowledgement of the pharmacy technician profession from within the GPhC and would benefit from increased input.

Pharmacy technicians are professionals and expected to behave as such but are often not treated that way.

Availability of funding, training and career pathway

Table 2: Availability of funding, training and career pathway

Barriers	Enablers
Role developing faster than supporting education and often without pharmacy technician input	Recognition of role development and the need to support with appropriate education and funding
No career pathway despite pace of role development	Establish a career pathway
Disparity between funding available for pharmacy technicians compared to pharmacists	Even distribution of funding in relation to requirements

Barriers	Enablers
Lack of education about what it means to be a professional	Pay review to match role development
Not financially rewarded for developing role	

The fact that roles are developing faster than supporting education, often without pharmacy technician input and examples of where this had led to issues, usually related to those developing the roles not having a clear understanding of the pharmacy technician and support staff education and training. The pharmacy technician profession needs to be clear about the unique body of knowledge and skills which they offer and play an active role in ensuring that advancing roles developed are relevant and appropriate. There needs to be recognition of the role development and the need to support with appropriate education and training. It was acknowledged that that the new qualification will help but need to consider the requirements of the legacy workforce and closing that gap.

With the pace of role development and the need for pharmacy technicians to be working to their full potential, a career pathway needs to be established to identify what routes people can take, what skills, knowledge and experience they need to get there and how this will be supported.

There also needs to be parity in funding in relation to requirements available for pharmacists and pharmacy technicians, pre and post qualification. Establish a pipeline for training pharmacy technicians and also funding and support for pharmacy technicians to undertake required qualifications to allow them to develop and advance, i.e. senior posts require degree or master's level study.

The lack of education about what it means to be a professional will be addressed in the new qualification but again, still needs consideration for the legacy workforce.

And not being financially rewarded for developing roles, the Agenda for Change profiles for pharmacy technicians and pharmacy support workers are outdated and need to be reviewed.

Opportunities and support to develop the profession

Table 3: Opportunities and support to develop the profession

Barriers	Enablers
Hierarchical structures prevent professional leadership being provided by pharmacy technicians for pharmacy technicians	Hierarchical structures which allow professional leadership to be provided by pharmacy technicians for pharmacy technicians
Unprofessional behaviours not challenged	Change culture
Lack of positive role models	Give the profession the permission to be professionals
Fear of repercussions	Pharmacy technicians leading on role development
Profession not promoted	Promote the profession
Professional body not representative of the profession	A professional body that is representative of the profession

The fact that hierarchical structures prevent pharmacy technicians from being able to provide professional leadership to pharmacy technicians and also in community pharmacy there is often not even any contact with another pharmacy technician so no peer support from within the profession.

Unprofessional behaviours not consistently challenged, and this wasn't necessarily unprofessional behaviours of pharmacy technicians, but the feeling that because the profession isn't respected and seen as inferior, they may not be taken seriously when they do challenge unprofessional behaviours.

There is also the fear of repercussions if they do challenge or raise concerns. There were a couple of examples of pharmacy technicians in community pharmacy that had raised concerns about the conduct of the pharmacist and the repercussions they experienced made it impossible to continue to work there. Neither had raised a concern with the GPhC and the reason given was they didn't think they would be taken seriously due to the reaction they received in the workplace and they did not have another pharmacy technician for peer support or guidance.

Pharmacy technicians recognise that they are not good at promoting themselves or the work they do. They felt they don't often get the opportunity to attend conferences and produce posters and showcase the profession.

It was raised that the professional body is not representative of the profession, with many of the community pharmacy participants being completely unaware that APTUK even existed. It is acknowledged that is difficult for APTUK to address, it is a voluntary organisation limited without significantly increased membership.

Give the profession permission to be professionals was a common phrase used. And allow pharmacy technicians to lead on the development of their profession, carving out what that looks like, back to what is relevant and appropriate. Participants felt there is a perception that pharmacy technicians want to go off and develop a separate path, but this is not the case, they want to work cohesively with pharmacists so that the direction of travel for pharmacy overall is aligned and that both professions and support staff are utilised to their full potential.

Process and legislation

Table 4: Process and legislation

Barriers	Enablers
Service models hinder	Service models reflect that the patient comes before process
Stifled by standard operating procedures	Change in governance/legislation to support pharmacy technicians carrying out appropriate roles
IT systems not integrated	Improved integration of IT systems
	Allow pharmacy technicians to carry out roles that utilise their skills
	Allow pharmacy technicians to use their professional judgment

It was felt that service models hinder providing person centred care, as not enough time can always be given to the support the individual's needs. Also, recognition that the role that pharmacy technicians play in community pharmacy is dependent on the business model and the fact that current legislation requires a pharmacist to be present means, unless the scale of the business allows, the pharmacists are often undertaking roles that could be undertaken by a pharmacy technician. It was acknowledged that that is unlikely to change until legislation changes to the supervision order and to recognise pharmacy technicians as healthcare professionals able to operate PGDs.

Being stifled by standards operating procedures (SOPs), particularly in community pharmacy means they feel unable to exercise their professional judgement. In primary and secondary care pharmacy technicians feel they use their professional judgement day in, day out, dealing with the grey area and they have the autonomy to do so. Those in community pharmacy said they follow SOPs and if it's not in an SOP they refer to the Pharmacist, even if they know the answer.

Integration of IT systems to aid cross sector communication and improve patient care.

And again, allowing PTs to carry out roles that utilise their skills and, allow them to use their professional judgement, reiterates the ask to be treated as professionals.

Next steps

The research findings were presented at GPhC Council Workshop in May and the group were asked to review and identify which they felt were within the GPhC's gift to action and/or influence and which were out with scope.

The findings have also been shared with the Association of Pharmacy Technicians UK (APTUK), and presented in various forums to allow other organisations and individuals to consider what is within their gift to action and/or influence.

