

## Will new standards for pharmacy technician education change pharmacy practice?

Will pharmacy technician training programs follow the nearly 8-decade-old pathway of accreditation and licensure now required for pharmacists? Step 1 is in place.

Founded in 1932 to accredit colleges of pharmacy, the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) has more recently partnered with the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP) to publish accreditation standards for pharmacy technician education and training programs.<sup>1,2</sup> After a 4-year collaborative effort, new technician accreditation standards were published on July 10, 2018, and went into effect on January 1, 2019.<sup>2</sup> Like many healthcare providers and educators, we believe accreditation standards and educational uniformity of technician training programs have the potential to advance patient safety, as well as facilitate pharmacists' engagement in direct patient-care services. However, we feel many questions need to be answered to clarify the technician training and certification pathway.

The ASHP/ACPE accreditation standards highlight the movement to create a "national standard for the preparation of the pharmacy technician workforce."<sup>2</sup> Uniquely, they include bi-level education options listed as "entry-level" and "advanced-level." Training programs can offer applicants each individual educational level or a combined educational package. Learners in the entry-level program must complete their current program prior to pursuing advanced-level education, unless they are in a combined program. A total of 15 standards are divided into 3 sections. Competency expectations—including general assistance in the pharmacist-patient care process, problem solving, high ethical conduct, regulatory knowledge, and the importance of maintaining practice skills through continuing education and continuous professional development—are highlighted in the first of 3 sections. The minimal curricular length for either option is 8 weeks. Entry-level programs require 400 hours, while advanced-level programs require 600 hours of education. Experiential expectations must progress from observation to simulation, followed by experiential activ-

ities performed under the supervision of a licensed pharmacist or nationally certified technician at a facility licensed by the board of pharmacy. Entry-level graduates must complete 1 experiential rotation that requires the use of acquired skills and competencies, such as patient confidentiality, impact of state and federal laws, the role of a technician in the medication-use process, discernment in healthcare environments, medical terminology, and calculations. Advanced-level graduates require 1 additional rotation beyond entry level.

During a conversation with 4 select members of the Tennessee Pharmacists Association Continuing Education Committee in the latter half of 2018, a comment related to technician training standards ignited a focused discussion. We quickly realized that little was certain about accredited training or certification opportunities available to pharmacy technicians, which drove us to ask several questions we now provide for your readership's consideration:

1. Will the new guidelines influence workforce demand preferentially for graduates of an accredited technician program, or will the traditional factors of market demand, regulatory policy, and practice-based factors remain dominant?
2. Will published standards alter the number of training programs offering accredited training nationally?
3. Will ASHP and ACPE champion the adoption of the accreditation standards after January 1, 2019, to stakeholders?
4. Will states adopt and regulate accredited technician training as entry-level requirements for all practice settings?
5. Will the new standards lead to state-specific licensure and reciprocity regulations for technicians?
6. How do we help learners differentiate technician accreditation standards and Pharmacy Technician Certification Board or National Healthcareer Association certification requirements?

*The Letters column is a forum for rapid exchange of ideas among readers of AJHP. Liberal criteria are applied in the review of submissions to encourage contributions to this column.*

*The Letters column includes the following types of contributions: (1) comments, addenda, and minor updates on previously published work, (2) alerts on potential problems in practice, (3) observations or comments on trends in drug use, (4) opinions on apparent trends or controversies in drug therapy or clinical research, (5) opinions on public health issues of interest to pharmacists in health systems, (6) comments on ASHP activities, and (7) human interest items about life as a pharmacist. Reports of adverse drug reactions must present a reasonably clear description of causality.*

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7. Will the pharmacy technician market see wage growth as a result of accredited training programs?

Answers to some of our questions will undoubtedly be forthcoming. As of October 2018, North Dakota was the only state requiring completion of an ASHP/ACPE-accredited technician training program for practice entry.<sup>3</sup> Recently, the Ohio Board of Pharmacy updated its rules that require technicians to have completed a board-approved training program to include ASHP/ACPE-accredited programs.<sup>4</sup>

Early discussions suggest pharmacy technician training programs are working toward meeting these new accreditation standards. Because of the desire to know more about how technician training programs are adapting, we reached out to Sharon Smith, Director of Education for Ross Education, LLC, which operates more than 40 pharmacy technician training programs across 7 states. She stated, "We have already started our revision of the Pharmacy Tech curriculum, aligning them with the new ASHP/ACPE standards. Our goal is to earn accreditation for both the entry-level and advanced-level for all of our schools." Widespread organizational commitment to accredited training programs and their accessibility is necessary for advancement of standardized technician education.

We believe that pharmacists, public health stakeholders, healthcare employers, and educational institutions should be advocates for a supportive and well-trained workforce that leverages collaborative behaviors to advance the responsibilities outlined in the pharmacist patient-care process. We are optimistic that educational providers will meet the new technician training standards in expectation of increased future demand. Regarding market demand for qualified technicians, we believe that some employers will do little to alter their qualification requirements until regulations by state boards of pharmacy mandate minimum training requirements. We also believe that technicians who excel in competency-based, accredited training programs will allow pharmacists to more quickly engage in advanced clinical responsibilities.

1. Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education. About. <https://www.acpe-accredit.org/about/> (accessed 2018 Sep 24).
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3. Mattingly AN. Entry-level practice requirements of pharmacy technicians across the United States: a review. *Am J Health Syst Pharm.* 2018; 75:1057-63.
4. Ohio Administrative Code. 4729:3-3-02 Approved pharmacy technician training programs. <http://codes.ohio.gov/oac/4729%3A3-3-02> (accessed 2018 Sep 25).

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## Standards for technician education

The American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP) supports accredited technician education and training through the collaboration between ASHP and the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) as well as technician certification through the Pharmacy Technician Certification Board for all pharmacy technicians. Having said that, the journey to achieving this goal is long and arduous.

As noted by Dr. Gray and colleagues, the revision of the technician education and training standard is a good step to-

ward accredited education, training, and regulation of pharmacy technicians, but it is not the first.<sup>1</sup> In February 2017, a Pharmacy Technician Stakeholder Consensus Conference was convened in an effort to identify the basic knowledge, skills, abilities, and core competencies required for the preparation of the technician workforce.<sup>2</sup> The conference was sponsored by the Pharmacy Technician Certification Board and planned in collaboration with ACPE and ASHP under the guidance of an advisory committee representing all ma-