



## The Pharmacy Technician Workforce in Canada: Roles, Demographics and Attitudes

### *Part I: Responses to National Survey of Pharmacy Technicians and Assistants*

#### Executive Summary

The Canadian Pharmacists Association (CPhA), on behalf of *Moving Forward: Pharmacy Human Resources for the Future*, retained Vision Research to undertake a survey of both pharmacists and pharmacy technicians across Canada. **Part I of this report presents the results of the survey of pharmacy technicians and assistants.**

The intent of the survey was both to develop a clear sense of the current profile of pharmacy technicians across Canada (numbers, distribution across jurisdictions and work settings, responsibilities, aspirations), and to measure the interest in and resistance to possible future directions for pharmacy technicians in relation to pharmacists. At its heart, this study explores the question: how might the role of pharmacy technicians evolve to better meet their career goals and to allow pharmacists to make fuller use of their skills and knowledge—all in the interest of enhancing patient care?

A questionnaire was sent via email and mail to a representative sample of 3000 pharmacies across Canada asking recipients to have the senior-most manager or owner (pharmacists) complete the questionnaire and share a second, different questionnaire with the pharmacy technicians on their staff. In addition, participation in the online survey was promoted by CPhA and its partners representing pharmacists and pharmacy technicians to those members for whom email addresses were available. In all, 2087 completed questionnaires were received from pharmacy technicians.

Since this is the first such study of the pharmacy technician workforce, it is difficult to assess the extent to which the sample of participants is representative of the pharmacy technician population as a whole. There is no baseline profile of the profession against which to compare the respondent profile, nor is there an exact measure of the total number of pharmacy technicians with which to calculate a response rate and commensurate confidence interval. For these reasons, care should be taken in extrapolating the findings to the overall population.

## Profile of Respondent Technicians

This survey provides the first national profile of pharmacy technicians in Canada. The pharmacy technician workforce is mostly female (94% of respondents are women), with an average age of 38.7 years. 43% of responding technicians work in hospitals and other related facilities, 37% in chain or franchise community pharmacies and 16% in independent community pharmacies.

Pharmacy technicians come to their jobs with a wide range of education and technical training; some (16%) have only a high school education and no formal pharmacy training, while about two in 10 (20%) report having some university education. A very small proportion (2%) have trained and worked abroad as either pharmacists or pharmacy technicians. The vast majority (62%) of respondents report having technician training from a career college or community college. This wide range of technical training and educational attainment reflects in part the variety of training programs for pharmacy technicians currently available in the different provinces and territories of the country.

A substantial proportion of pharmacy technicians have been out of school for some time. More than half (55%) completed their education and training at least 10 years ago. Of those with only a high school education, three-quarters (77%) completed it more than 10 years ago.

The characteristics of the pharmacy technician respondents in this study were substantially different depending on their work setting. Those working in chain or franchise stores tended to be younger, have fewer years of work experience, were more likely to have graduated from a private career college or been trained by their employer, and were more likely to be in larger cities or metropolitan areas. Those in independent community pharmacies were more likely to have no technical training other than on-the-job, be older, have considerable work experience, and live in small communities. Hospital technicians were more likely to live in larger cities, to have completed a one-year community college program and have the most experience working as pharmacy technicians.

## Current Jobs

To the extent that these functions were permitted in their jurisdictions, pharmacy technicians are now performing a number of functions involving collection of patient information, verification and preparation of prescriptions, and release of products under certain circumstances. Those working in community settings were much more likely to be performing these functions than those in health care institutions. Hospital technicians, however, often prepare automated dispensing equipment, replace ward stocks or have responsibility for narcotics. Many package products in unit dosage packages or prepare sterile preparations.

Three-quarters (74%) of hospital technicians participate in a "tech-check-tech" routine where they verify the accuracy and completeness of products prepared by other technicians; half as many (37%) technicians in community settings do this. About four in 10 technicians in both settings (47% and 44% respectively) were responsible for supervising other technicians.

The survey also provided some insight on the question of how many pharmacy technicians are currently working in Canada, and the ratios are somewhat lower than expected. Survey respondents reported an average (mean) of 2.5 full-time technicians and 2.1 part-time technicians per community pharmacy (chain and independent). Assuming the average part-time technician works half a regular workweek, this yields an average of 3.4 technician Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs) per community pharmacy.

In contrast, the survey showed an average (mean) of 15 full-time technicians and 7.5 part-time technicians per hospital pharmacy (including long-term care facilities). Assuming the average part-time technician works half a regular workweek, this yields an average of 18.5 technician FTEs per hospital pharmacy.

To help develop a ratio of technicians to pharmacists, we also asked respondents how many pharmacists worked in their pharmacies. Technician respondents reported an average of 3 pharmacist FTEs per community pharmacy, for a ratio of 1.13 technician FTEs per pharmacist FTE in community settings. In hospital settings, technicians reported an average of 14 pharmacist FTEs, for a higher ratio of 1.32 technician FTEs per pharmacist FTE in a hospital setting.

### **Job Satisfaction**

Pharmacy technicians reported being quite satisfied with a number of job-related factors, including their professional relationships both with pharmacists and with other technicians and with opportunities to use their skills. Most technicians (60%) felt that they had the right amount of responsibility given their education, training and experience, although this was less true for technicians who were already certified. However, certain differences emerged between the opinions of hospital- and community-based technicians. For example, 85% of community technicians were satisfied with the way their technical tasks are shared with pharmacists, while only 69% of hospital technicians are similarly satisfied.

One notable contrast to technicians' overall satisfaction trends was related to opportunities for job or career growth. Less than half (48%) of technicians were satisfied with this aspect of their job. Workloads may also be an issue, with 45% of technicians indicating they have "too much" or "much too much" to do.

While many respondents were unaware of the specifics of their employers' pay policies, it would appear that they did not currently receive much support from their employers to pursue technical upgrading. Wages generally reflected years of experience rather than type of training or certification. Less than a third of technicians said their employers either provided in-house courses for them (32%) or would pay for technical courses provided by others (31%).

### **Internationally Trained Technicians**

Just over 2% of technicians responding to the survey had received their training outside North America. More than half of these (60%) had trained and practiced as pharmacists in some other country. These former-pharmacists are more likely to be working in community settings than in health care institutions, and more likely to be working part-time than full-time.

Compared to all technicians, those who had been trained abroad were less comfortable with their professional work relationships. Those who had trained as technicians were at least as satisfied with opportunities to use their skills, the amount of responsibility given their skills, and their opportunities for career growth. However, those who had trained as pharmacists in other countries and were now working as technicians were somewhat less satisfied in all these dimensions.

### Changes to Training and Utilization of Technicians

Technicians appear to want national educational standards. 85% of technician respondents expressed support for national accreditation of community college programs. More than 70% of technicians expressed support for possibly requiring all pharmacy technicians to graduate from an accredited program.

Pharmacy technicians are highly interested in moving towards regulation, even though it may require additional training and expanded duties. More than eight in 10 (84%) pharmacy technicians expressed interest in becoming a *regulated pharmacy technician*, of which an impressive 54% state they would be "very interested". Certification of pharmacy technicians, whether voluntary or mandatory, was also positively received. 70% of pharmacy technicians supported voluntary certification, while 62% supported mandatory certification. Overall, technicians were generally supportive of most of the initiatives explored in the survey.

### Next Steps

The findings generated by this research present many opportunities for more in-depth exploration on pharmacy technicians attitudes and intentions regarding their future. *Moving Forward* will be conducting focus groups to investigate some of these areas in the spring and summer of 2007. Visit [www.pharmacyhr.ca](http://www.pharmacyhr.ca) for more information.