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An Update on Pharmacy Technician Regulation in Canada

By Diane Reeder, BA, CPhT

Statement of objectives

Upon completion of this lesson, the pharmacy technician will be able to:

1. Differentiate between regulation and registration.
2. Summarize the national and provincial initiatives related to pharmacy technician regulation.
3. Understand the implications of regulation for the individual technician.

Pharmacy today is busier than it has ever been. Extended pharmacy hours, an aging population, rising birth rates and an increase in chronic diseases, have all contributed to an increased use of pharmacy services.¹ In addition, a pharmacist shortage and an increased demand on the pharmacist to perform expanded duties necessitate change in pharmacy practice. As a result, opportunities have arisen for pharmacy technicians to assume additional functions. The challenge to the industry is to provide an assurance that the technician has adequate skills and knowledge to successfully perform these functions. In the interest of public safety, pharmacy technician regulation and registration are methods of screening individuals to ensure that only qualified individuals are providing services.

What is regulation? How does it differ from registration?

Regulation is a method of ensuring that peo-

ple who purport to have specific skills and knowledge really do have those attributes. It is a way of reducing and preventing errors and adverse events due to incompetence. Ultimately, it is a means of protecting the public from harm.

Regulation is a result of legislation. To be regulated, a group of practitioners must agree that regulation is necessary and desirable. They must persuade the provincial government that it is in the best interest of the public to regulate their profession. The government passes legislation requiring regulation and then the group being regulated provides the elements necessary for regulation, based on a standard framework. These elements, (e.g., educational and practice standards, a complaint investigation and disciplinary process, a continuing competence program, title protection and more) form the regulation for that specific group. The details of regulation can take a number of years to prepare



and must meet certain guidelines set forth by legal counsel and provincial requirements. Regulation also provides title protection, i.e., only those qualified to practise can use the title.

Registration is a process of ensuring that those who practise a profession meet formal requirements. A registry (or register) is a list of successful candidates and can be designed to contain specific elements important to the owners of the registry. Typical requirements for registration are successful completion of specific educational outcomes, successful completion of an examination, demonstration of competence, proof of good character and reputation, demonstration of proficiency in the English language and payment of a fee. A license or permit is provided as proof of registration, and it must be renewed periodically (usually on an annual basis). Renewal may have additional requirements, for example, the demonstration of continuing professional development and/or competence.

Continuing competence programs are set up by regulatory colleges to ensure that registered practitioners continue to maintain and improve their knowledge. Continuing competence includes continuing personal and professional development, such as attendance at conferences, workshops or other formal learning opportunities, ongoing self-assessment of learning needs and maintenance of records of continuing education activities to prove competence. Continuing Education Units (CEUs) are a formal method of determining whether an applicant for registration has completed an adequate quantity of self-learning.

Regulation of healthcare professions

In Canada, regulation of healthcare professions falls under the mandate of provincial governments. In each province, there is some kind of overarching legislation that provides a framework for professions and their members—the Health Professions Act or similar terminology. This legislation requires that each profession sets educational and practice standards for their registered members. It also requires that complaints about a practice or a practitioner be investigated under common rules.

There has been a movement to standardize the pharmacy technician profession across Canada. A number of organizations have collaborated on recommendations for the education and practice of technicians, which is expected to have a positive impact on the pharmacy profession as a whole. It will still be a provincial decision to accept or reject the national recommendations.

The profession of pharmacy is rapidly changing for both pharmacists and pharmacy technicians. The following synopsis reflects a summary of the profession as of February 2008, with a focus on aspects that pertain to technician regulation. Further changes may have occurred by the time this article is published and technicians are encouraged to review any further changes through the websites and organizations described below.

National initiatives

The Canadian Association of Pharmacy Technicians (CAPT) has been instrumental in promoting the recognition of pharmacy technicians as vital components in the delivery of health care. As a major stakeholder, CAPT has provided a voice for pharmacy technicians at a national level.

Moving Forward – Pharmacy Human Resources for the Future

A number of years ago, a need was identified to quantify and understand the pharmacy workforce in Canada. Out of this initial query came the Moving Forward team of experts and researchers, administered by the Canadian Pharmacists Association (CPhA). Their work included identification of characteristics of the pharmacy profession, what is contributing to the gaps within the profession and how those gaps can be rectified. One of their key priorities was “exploring how to support the evolving role of the pharmacist by expanding the role of pharmacy technicians.”² Results of the research can be found on the CPhA website at www.pharmacyhr.ca

Blueprint for Pharmacy – Designing the Future Together

In 2005, CPhA sponsored an ongoing initiative that would become the Blueprint for Action for the Pharmacy Profession in

Canada. It is a “collaborative undertaking to clearly define the pharmacist’s role in the healthcare system of tomorrow.”³ Numerous methods have been used to obtain feedback from pharmacists and technicians—surveys, think tanks, working groups and more. This strategic action plan is ongoing and is expected to have a significant impact on the pharmacy technician profession in the future.

Education – Canadian Pharmacy Technician Educators Association (CPTEA)

CPTEA is a national organization comprised of pharmacy technician educators from public and private programs offered through community, regional and career colleges in Canada. From the beginning, they focused on the need for standard educational outcomes for pharmacy technicians at entry to practice. The results of their work can be viewed on their website at www.cptea.ca

Competency – National Association of Pharmacy Regulatory Authorities (NAPRA)

NAPRA services the provincial pharmacy regulatory bodies. According to their mission statement at www.napra.org, NAPRA “enhances the activities of the pharmacy regulatory authorities by:

Representing the common interests of the member organizations;

Serving as a national resource centre; and

Promoting the national implementation of progressive regulatory programs and standards.”

In 2007, NAPRA brought a group of stakeholders together, including pharmacy technician representatives from every province, to develop and define competencies required of a technician at entry to practice. These competencies dovetail with the educational outcomes created by CPTEA and can be viewed on the NAPRA website.

Accreditation – Canadian Council for Accreditation of Pharmacy Programs (CCAPP)

“Accreditation is the public recognition accorded an academic program that meets established professional qualifications and education standards through initial and

periodic evaluation. Accreditation is concerned with both quality assurance and program enhancement.⁷⁴ Assessment and evaluation of the quality of educational programs for pharmacists in Canada is the mandate of CCAPP. In 2006, CCAPP resolved to develop accreditation guidelines for pharmacy technician education and training programs in Canada. The Accreditation Standards for Pharmacy Technician Programs can be found at <http://www.ccapp-accredit.ca/standards/>. CCAPP offers information workshops to colleges providing pharmacy technician programs and conducts site visits to support their assessment and evaluation of program quality.

Qualifications – Pharmacy Examining Board of Canada (PEBC)

To ensure that a graduate from an accredited pharmacy technician program meets the entry-to-practice qualifications, an examination is being developed by PEBC. It is expected to be piloted in 2009 and to be in place by 2010. This will be a national exam that provincial regulatory bodies may choose to use as a qualifying mechanism for technicians at entry to practice. Visit www.pebc.ca for more information.

Provincial initiatives

Ontario

Ontario has led the way in Canada in its quest for official recognition and regulation of pharmacy technicians. Legislation was passed by the Ontario government in 2007, which supports the regulation of pharmacy technicians as a new profession, in a separate class of registration under the Ontario College of Pharmacists (OCP). In preparation for regulation, Ontario plans to discontinue its pharmacy technician certification exam in October 2008; it will be replaced by the PEBC evaluating exam. Ontario will likely be one of the provinces selected to pilot the PEBC exam in 2009. It is expected that technician regulation will be implemented in Ontario by 2010.

Alberta

In Alberta, recognition and self-regulation of pharmacy technicians was first advocated by CAPT-Alberta. Many initiatives were undertaken, including an application to the Alberta Minister of Health for

regulated status under the provincial Health Professions Act (HPA). In 2006, legislation was passed, which allowed the Alberta College of Pharmacists (ACP) to come under the HPA. In their regulation, the definition of a pharmacy technician was provided, which is: “an individual who has successfully completed a pharmacy technician program recognized by the Council and who is registered in the pharmacy technician register provided for in the bylaws.”⁷⁵ The provision of a definition necessitated the introduction of a voluntary register, which commenced in January 2008. In collaboration with ACP, work continues towards regulation of technicians in Alberta.

British Columbia

Following consultation with pharmacy personnel, a recommendation was made for recognition and regulation of pharmacy technicians under the College of Pharmacists of British Columbia (CPBC). Meetings were subsequently held to inform and obtain feedback from stakeholders. CPBC is currently drafting legislation for pharmacy technicians to come under the Health Professions Act. Once technicians fall under the Act, CPBC will request that a separate category of regulation be added for technicians. B.C. anticipates that the timeline for the national initiatives that are currently underway and their provincial legislation will connect to allow for technician regulation in approximately 2010.

Saskatchewan

Pharmacy technicians are regulated indirectly by the Saskatchewan College of Pharmacists (SCP), since functions that may be delegated by a pharmacist to a technician are specified in the SaskTech guide.⁶ A discussion paper is being prepared by SCP to determine their position on whether or not they wish to assume the responsibility for technician regulation and the amendments that would be required to the Pharmacy Act.

Manitoba

In Manitoba, the role of the pharmacy technician is recognized in legislation as being an integral part of the healthcare team. Pharmaceutical regulation has been drafted by the Manitoba Pharmaceutical

Association (MPhA) with collaboration from pharmacy technicians through MB-CAPT. The draft regulation includes the definition of a pharmacy technician and proposed expanded duties. It will be presented to government once the members of MPhA have ratified it.⁷

Quebec

According to a presentation made to the National Dialogue on Pharmacy Technicians in November 2007,⁸ collaboration is occurring between pharmacist and technician organizations in Quebec. However, they are in the early stages of pursuing recognition of the technician role. AQATP, the Association Québécoise des Assistant(e)s-Techniques en Pharmacie Secteur Public et Secteur Privé, is the voice of pharmacy technicians in that province.

New Brunswick

The New Brunswick Pharmaceutical Society expects to have regulation of pharmacy technicians in their new Pharmacy Act, anticipated in 2009-10.

Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island

According to a presentation made to the National Dialogue on Pharmacy Technicians in November 2007,⁸ the Nova Scotia College of Pharmacists has established a Task Force on Pharmacy Technicians to address the current lack of accountability and to address validation of qualifications. Their provisional goal is to develop and implement legislation surrounding the practice of registered pharmacy technicians in Nova Scotia. The Prince Edward Island Pharmacy Board will also be participating in the Nova Scotia College of Pharmacists' Task Force on Pharmacy Technicians.

Newfoundland

In Newfoundland, preliminary discussions have begun with the Department of Health and the Newfoundland and Labrador Pharmacy Board Community Services related to the development of regulations that specify the parameters around the delegation of aspects of the practice of pharmacy to technicians. To this point, their focus has been upon the hospital pharmacy setting, with the intent of look-

ing at the community pharmacy setting at a later date. Protocols have been developed for a pilot project on delegation to hospital technicians that may serve as a template for regulations under the Pharmacy Act.

Northwest Territories

According to communication from Jeannette Hall, Registrar, Professional Licensing, Department of Health and Social Services, Government of the Northwest Territories on December 10, 2007, there is no current plan to regulate pharmacy technicians.

Yukon and Nunavut

No information was available.

Why is regulation important to you as a pharmacy technician?

Pharmacy technicians form a separate and distinct health profession and provide services that have the potential for significant risk of harm to the public. In the interests of public safety, there must be minimum standards of education, skill and knowledge to perform the duties of a pharmacy technician. Therefore, there needs to be minimum entry-to-practice requirements and ongoing continuing competence requirements to practise. The move to regulation will impact technicians currently in the workplace, as well as future candidates.

Practically speaking, this means that it will no longer be acceptable to hire someone who has not had formal education to perform the duties of a pharmacy technician. Minimum expectations of knowledge will be required prior to being able to work in the pharmacy industry. In addition, there will be expectations that technicians will adopt an attitude of continuous learning—attending workshops, conferences or

other opportunities for sharing and learning new skills, all on an ongoing basis.

The accountability of a pharmacy technician as a regulated health professional will increase. They will be expected to uphold all legal, ethical and professional standards (e.g., the code of ethics and standards of practice). Technicians will be accountable to a variety of individuals and organizations, such as the patients, the employer and the regulatory college. The college sets professional standards for registered members and ensures that members meet those standards on an ongoing basis. If members fail to meet these standards, the college is also responsible for undertaking disciplinary action.

It has been proposed that there be no “grandparenting” allowed. What this means is that all currently working technicians will be required to write an evaluating exam. Pharmacy technicians will need the knowledge and skills to perform expanded duties that they may not already be performing. A determination will be made of the gaps in knowledge and opportunities provided to bridge those gaps. Individual technicians can visit the websites listed above (CPTEA, NAPRA) and their provincial organization to review required technician competencies. Depending on their present position, the technician may currently fulfill all competencies and will have little to do to prepare for regulation, while others may determine a few gaps that need to be filled. The provincial authorities will likely provide ‘bridging’ courses to assist current technicians to upgrade any gaps in their skills so that they are prepared to write the PEBC exam. As an example, Ontario has developed a bridging program that will be available to technicians in 2008.

If a pharmacy technician chooses not to update their skills and not to write the

required exams to become regulated, they may be unable to continue to use the title ‘Pharmacy Technician’ as it will likely be protected in the new legislation (this will be the case in Ontario). It is still to be determined if a group of pharmacy personnel will emerge possibly using the term Pharmacy Assistant. This group would be unable to perform specified tasks but would still be able to assist with some basic duties under supervision.

Future

Regulation of pharmacy technicians will allow for support of pharmacists in the provision of more comprehensive patient care services and the promotion of optimal pharmacy services to the public. Registration will serve as the means of signaling to others that an individual possesses the knowledge, skills and abilities to fulfill the new role and accept professional accountability for quality patient care services.⁹ By 2010, mandatory requirements for skills, education and abilities (competencies) will be in place in a number of provinces. It is likely that most provinces will require that all new graduates successfully pass the PEBC qualifying exam prior to entry into the workplace as a pharmacy technician. Ongoing confirmation of continuing professional development and continuing competence will become compulsory to renewing a practice permit.

With the increased complexity of pharmaceuticals and the increased demand on the pharmacist’s time to provide direct patient counselling and other expanded duties, distributive duties are falling more and more on the technician. Medication safety must not be compromised by inadequate education, skills or knowledge on the part of the pharmacy technician performing these duties.

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► QUESTIONS

1. Regulation of a profession is

- a) A national initiative
- b) Means of protecting the public from unscrupulous or incompetent practitioners
- c) Not really necessary since pharmacists are responsible for any work that a technician performs
- d) Collaboration of initiatives from CPTEA, NAPRA, CCAPP and PEBC

2. Registration is

- a) The same thing as regulation
- b) A national initiative
- c) Required to work as a pharmacy technician in Canada
- d) A process of ensuring that those who practice a profession meet formal requirements

3. PEBC

- a) Is developing a national exam that will be required of all new graduates of a pharmacy technician program entering the pharmacy field
- b) Is developing a national exam that may be used to evaluate the readiness of a new graduate from a pharmacy technician program to enter the pharmacy field
- c) Is a provincial organization in Prince Edward Island that is considering pharmacy technician regulation
- d) Is developing an exam that will only be used in Ontario

4. CCAPP

- a) Has developed entry-to-practice competencies for the pharmacy technician
- b) Is only involved with accreditation of university programs for pharmacists
- c) Assesses and evaluates the quality of educational programs in the pharmacy field
- d) Is a pharmacy technician organization responsible for continuing competence

5. NAPRA

- a) Is a North American treaty to allow pharmacy technicians to work in any province or state
- b) Has developed entry-to-practice competencies for the pharmacy technician
- c) Accredits pharmacy technician programs at community, regional and career colleges

Please select the best answer for each question or answer online at www.pharmacygateway.ca for instant results.

- d) Is only involved with pharmacist initiatives

6. CPTEA

- a) Is a formal association of pharmacy technician educators
- b) Has developed a document defining educational outcomes for pharmacy technician programs
- c) Was established to lead, advance, support and promote excellence in pharmacy technician education
- d) All of the above

7. Moving Forward is:

- a) A project strategically focused on pharmacy human resources for the future
- b) Administered by provincial authorities to secure regulation for pharmacy technicians
- c) A term used by various national organizations with respect to legislation
- d) Nothing to do with pharmacy

8. In the future, you may be required to write an evaluating exam

- a) At completion of a pharmacy technician program
- b) In preparation for licensing or registration
- c) To maintain your status as a pharmacy technician
- d) All of the above

9. Pharmacy technicians should be regulated

- a) In the interests of public safety
- b) To support pharmacists in the provision of more comprehensive patient care services
- c) To promote optimal pharmacy services to the public
- d) All of the above

10. Federal initiatives include

- a) Development of an evaluating exam, entry-to-practice competencies, educational outcomes, accreditation of pharmacy technician education programs and exploration of the changing role of the pharmacy technician
- b) Title protection to ensure that anyone who is called a pharmacy technician is qualified to do so
- c) Registration and licensure of pharmacy technicians to protect the public
- d) Provision of pharmaceutical care to patients and clients

11. Grandparenting will likely not be allowed because

- a) It is difficult to assess knowledge, skills and abilities without an evaluating exam
- b) The training and experience of individuals who currently work in pharmacies is extremely varied
- c) There is an urgent need to ensure the knowledge, skills and abilities of all pharmacy technicians
- d) All of the above

12. Blueprint for Pharmacy

- a) Is administered by CPhA
- b) Is a strategic action plan for the pharmacy profession in Canada
- c) Proposes that the safety, security and integrity of the drug distribution system will continue to be protected through the enhanced role of regulated pharmacy technicians
- d) All of the above

13. Regulation of pharmacy technicians

- a) Is required prior to working in the pharmacy industry
- b) Is a bridging program for technicians currently working in pharmacy
- c) Will allow for support of pharmacists in the provision of more comprehensive patient care services
- d) Is not allowed in Canada since technicians are not a profession

14. Once regulation is established, all pharmacy technicians currently working in the pharmacy field

- a) Will be required to go back to school
- b) Will be required to undergo bridging education
- c) Will be required to write an evaluating exam
- d) Will not need to do anything if they are a graduate of a recognized program

15. Competence

- a) Is the public recognition accorded an academic program that meets established professional qualifications
- b) Is a measure of the skills, behaviours (or attitudes) and knowledge of a particular profession
- c) Is the need for standard educational outcomes for pharmacy technicians at entry to practice
- d) Has nothing to do with pharmacy practice

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