

TECHtalk

NOVEMBER 2023

TECH AIMS TO USE MASTER'S DEGREE TO FORGE NEW PATHWAYS

KARYANN DORN CAME TO HER CAREER

as a pharmacy technician in an unorthodox way. She originally took a degree in anthropology. In 2008, while doing field research in Ecuador, she became ill and was eventually diagnosed with an autoimmune disease that forced her to abandon her studies.

But her positive experience with pharmacy professionals as she navigated her various medications, and discussions with a pharmacy technician friend, drew her to that profession. "I wanted to have the ability to give back and remind people who are going through drastic autoimmune things that it gets better. That was my motivation."

Graduating just before the advent of regulation in Alberta, she worked as a pharmacy assistant in Calgary until she became licensed. She later took compounding courses in Saskatchewan.

Dorn loved working in a compounding lab, but again, her illness forced her to refocus. "When you have an autoimmune disease, it's probably best that you don't work in a lab with hormones all day," she says, acknowledging that "it is painful when you learn that something you love to do is something you can't do anymore."

She moved into a community outreach pharmacy, working with vulnerable populations, and admits that she had no idea what

she doing. "I felt scared all the time. The first few times I saw a substance poisoning, it was really frightening." She took courses in harm reduction and wound care, and learned a lot about the different resources in her community.

But Dorn began to see gaps based on regulations that—even if unintentional—were actually harmful to the patient. That motivated her to return to school for her master's degree. "I wanted to look at the gaps in community pharmacy from a bigger perspective."

Based on her background both in anthropology and pharmacy, she was accepted at the University of British Columbia in a program called Interdisciplinary Graduate Studies. She chose a global studies track, "because I wanted to look at programs and resources in other communities, particularly in places like Finland and Norway, where they were doing clean drug supply and housing patients and bringing their medical care to them."

But COVID-19 intervened, prohibiting travel for research. Dorn pivoted to health research for maternal COVID-19 vaccines, completing her thesis titled "Perception of COVID-19 Vaccines Among Pregnant People in B.C.: A Qualitative Study." She has presented her research at various conferences.

The pharmacy technician now plans to do outreach pharmacy in Vancouver—she currently volunteers at an encampment. She says her work at the university "gave me the language and the ability to continue to study social justice and outreach practices in healthcare in a different way. It gave me a connection and network to team up with individuals who are in social work, in Indigenous care." She also plans to volunteer on professional boards and committees, and advocate for pharmacy techs in B.C.

And while she always "champions being a pharmacy technician" to students, she doesn't sugar coat the profession either, noting that although techs have gained ground in some areas, it remains an uphill battle, with



"One of the great things that can come from technicians going back to school to do their Master's is to start giving our own approaches to research and to build the profession."

some giving up their licences because of the costs and the risks involved. "But I also remind students that they can be resilient, that they can stand up for themselves and that they shouldn't let these things deplete them."

Ultimately, Dorn's goal is to help develop the profession. "I think one of the great things that can come from technicians going back to school to do their Master's is to start giving our own approaches to research and to build the profession." In the U.K., for example, many technicians with a master's degree are working towards prescribing rights and research in hospitals and with patients. "For me, it's following all these different blueprints and bringing it back to Canada," she says. "When I went back to school, it wasn't just for me; it was to create a pathway for others to follow."

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Tech discusses role of pharmacy teams in diverted drugs

PHARMACY TEAMS PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE in helping keep drugs secure and patients safe, said pharmacy technician Dana Lyons in an article published by the Alberta College of Pharmacy (ACP).

Lyons is president of Street Sisters Society, a non-profit, community-based outreach service providing basic needs for vulnerable women and those experiencing homelessness. In this capacity, she works closely with many individuals who experience substance use disorder.

The high costs of prescription drugs on the black market often lead people to alternatives, such as fentanyl, she noted. “The Street Sisters Society helps a number of folks who are on fentanyl, and we often ask them their story. It’s a trend that most of them started on prescription drugs such as Oxycontin or Percocet, and when they could no longer get prescription drugs, they ended up taking other drugs like heroin, methamphetamine, or fentanyl.”

Pharmacy teams can save lives by helping patients access naloxone. “We need more people getting naloxone from the pharmacy; pharmacy teams should encourage people to have naloxone as part of their first aid kit,” Lyons urged.

She highlighted the importance of a caring, patient-centred approach. “It’s important for the pharmacy teams to have conversations with patients about the addictive nature of these medications, work with doctors, develop care plans, and be prepared for early intervention.”

Lyons outlined some responsibilities for pharmacy teams:

- Create an inclusive environment for all patients;
- Ensure all patients have the information and resources they need before dispensing opioids;
- Be prepared to support patients with opioid use disorder;
- Help prevent forgeries and robberies.

For more information, visit [Diverted drugs and the opioid epidemic | Alberta College of Pharmacy \(abpharmacy.ca\)](https://www.abpharmacy.ca).

PTSBC hosts webinar on antimicrobial resistance

IN ANOTHER OF ITS POPULAR MONTHLY WEBINARS, the Pharmacy Technician Society of British Columbia (PTSBC) hosted a session titled “Beta-Lactam Antibiotics & Beta-Lactam Allergies.”

Dr. Marina Simeonova, clinical pharmacy coordinator, antimicrobial stewardship program, at Island Health’s Royal Jubilee Hospital, discussed the importance of using antibiotics wisely. She noted that antimicrobial resistance has been increasing during the last five years of surveillance (2016-2020). That’s because when antibiotics kill bacteria causing the illness, they also kill the good bacteria protecting the body from infection, she explained. The antibiotic-resistant bacteria grow and take over. Some bacteria give their antibiotic resistance to other bacteria, causing more problems.

Island Health’s antimicrobial stewardship program’s mission is to optimize antimicrobial use for all patients by helping clinicians and care teams select the “right drug” for the “right patient” at the “right time.”

Beta-Lactam allergies—primarily to penicillins, cephalosporins and carbapenems—are the most frequently reported antibiotic allergies, but a U.S. study revealed that nine out of 10 patients reporting penicillin allergy were not truly allergic, and 80% of patients with IgE-mediated penicillin allergy lose the sensitivity after 10 years. Inaccurate antibiotic allergies can lead to broader antibiotic consumption, more adverse effects, increased antimicrobial resistance and increased costs, noted Simeonova. Allergy can be evaluated through skin testing and/or graded drug challenge, in which the patient starts with a small dose and gradually increases to the desired dose.

Pharmacy technicians can be key players in allergy interviews, said Simeonova, asking patients at prescription drop-off about allergy history, and communicating with pharmacists regarding patient allergies. She advocates documenting allergies and patient reactions when completing Best Possible Medication Histories (or via community patient health record, if applicable and within scope).

“An accurate and thorough interview can help prescribers understand the history, nature and outcomes of a documented allergy, and therefore help inform decision-making at the point of care,” she said. “Pharmacy technicians are extremely valuable in our healthcare system and can play a role in starting the conversation about patients’ allergy history.”

P.E.I. adds Injection Decision Tool for techs, submits first NIDR report

THE P.E.I. COLLEGE OF PHARMACY RECENTLY ADDED an Injection Decision Tool for pharmacy technicians. The tool, which joins an existing one for pharmacists, is an infographic that poses questions and indicates, based on the response, if the technician is permitted to administer the injectable product or if further questions need to be answered.

To view the Tool, visit [Injection-Decision-Tool-Technicians-July-2023.pdf](#) ([pepharmacists.ca](#)).

The College also recently shared community pharmacies' first submission to the National Incident Data Repository (NIDR). The NIDR received 129 reports of medication incidents or near misses from 50 pharmacies between October 2022 and March 2023. (The deadline for enrollment in the NIDR was January 31, 2023, but some pharmacies started submitting before then.)

Although only one incident resulted in "mild harm," 50% of the incidents and near misses reported involved order entry. Therefore, the Institute for Safe Medication Practices recommends scanning a copy of the original prescription into the pharmacy system during order entry and consulting it regularly as part of technical and clinical checks. It also recommends incorporating a pharmacy technician or pharmacist into the order entry stage to facilitate data verification with an earlier double check with the patient, instead of relying on the final check at the time of prescription pickup.

CSHP highlights environmental impact of inhalers

CLIMATE CHANGE REPRESENTS one of the greatest challenges we face this century, and the healthcare sector is one of the largest contributors to the emission of greenhouse gases (GHG).

In the pharmacy profession, inhalers contribute significantly to GHG. The pressurized metered dose inhalers (pMDI) and breath-actuated inhalers contain hydrofluorocarbon propellants, which are potent GHG, says Canadian Society of Hospital Pharmacists (CSHP) student Layne Liberty in her article "The environmental impact of inhalers." Other inhaler devices, such as dry powered inhalers and soft mist inhalers, do not contain propellants and therefore have a lower carbon footprint (CFP).

Pharmacy professionals are ideally positioned to advocate for and incorporate environmental sustainability in their practice. They can educate prescribers, colleagues and patients on proper use and disposal of inhalers, proper inhaler technique and alternative therapies available. The website "Creating a Sustainable Canadian Health System in a Climate Crisis" (CASCADES), at [Sustainable Pharmacy and Prescribing - CASCADES Canada](#), features a section on "Implementation resources for sustainable pharmacy and prescribing practices" that includes a step-by-step guide to more sustainable inhalers.

"Asthma and COPD carry a significant environmental burden due to pMDI use, misdiagnosis and incorrect inhaler use," wrote Liberty. "The use and disposal phase for pMDIs make up approximately 85% of the total pMDI CFP, so switching to inhalers... that have a lower CFP, and ensuring proper medication disposal, will contribute to mitigating the environmental impact of inhalers."



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CPhM invites techs to apply to committees

THE COLLEGE OF PHARMACISTS OF MANITOBA (CPhM) encourages pharmacy technicians with diverse backgrounds and experience working in different practice settings to apply to join its statutory and standing committees.

“By joining the committees, you will have the opportunity to work alongside other pharmacy technicians, pharmacists, members of the public, and Council members to help ensure the safe and quality care of pharmacy practice in Manitoba,” says the College’s “Friday Five” newsletter.

CPhM invites all interested applicants to submit a Committee Expression of Interest form, available on its website. The College considers several factors when reviewing the applications, including experience, expertise, practice setting, demographic representation, and unique skills and attributes.

Pharmacy professionals still struggling with mental health: survey

THE CANADIAN PHARMACISTS ASSOCIATION’S 2023 “Canadian Pharmacy Mental Health and Workplace Wellness Survey,” conducted earlier this year, showed that, while the situation is improving compared with the inaugural survey in 2022, more work is needed to improve the health and wellbeing of Canada’s pharmacy teams.

One in three of the 1,136 pharmacy technicians and pharmacists who responded rated their mental health and wellbeing as “good” or “very good” over the past year, which represents an 11-point improvement compared with 2022. Risk of burnout among pharmacy professionals has decreased 13 points, from 92% in 2022 to 79% in 2023. But workplace exhaustion and disengagement continue to be widespread, attributed to a strained healthcare system, staffing challenges and increasing administrative burden.

The survey revealed that in the next year:

- 43% are likely/somewhat likely to reduce their hours, up 9 points from last year;
- 32% are likely/somewhat likely to leave their job for another in the pharmacy sector;
- 28% are likely/somewhat likely to leave their job for one outside the pharmacy sector;

- 22% are likely/somewhat likely to retire from pharmacy, the majority of which are early retirements.

CPhA says its Workforce Wellness Steering Committee and its Pharmacy Wellness Task Force “are actively pursuing solutions that will enhance workforce planning efforts, support pharmacy professionals’ entry into practice, and improve satisfaction and wellness within the profession.”

Some of the Association’s recent and ongoing work includes:

- The development of tools to support pharmacy teams;
- Workforce planning studies to gather data to better understand current and future

- pharmacy workforce needs and capacity;
- Continued advocacy for student loan forgiveness for pharmacists who work in rural and remote communities;
- Support for new entrants to practice to support both new graduates and newly arrived internationally trained pharmacists;
- Supporting provincial advocacy to improve reimbursement of pharmacy services;
- Addressing cost containment strategies that are impacting pharmacy operations.

For more information, visit [National survey shows mental health of pharmacy professionals has improved but more support and investments needed to address continued challenges - English \(pharmacists.ca\)](#).

life effects



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Helping patients choose OTC products

THE SHEER NUMBER OF NONPRESCRIPTION PRODUCTS ON PHARMACY SHELVES

can be overwhelming for patients. Pharmacy technicians have an important role to play in helping ensure patients are using over-the-counter (OTC) products wisely and appropriately.

At the recent OTC Spark virtual conference, hosted by *Pharmacy Practice + Business*, Dr. Kris Mendoza, pharmacy manager at Norfolk Pharmacy in Guelph, Ont., and Dr. Allison Tario, Roulston's Pharmacy, and adjunct clinical assistant professor, University of Waterloo, participated in a panel discussion on "Perspectives on OTC: Promoting appropriate selection and use."

Tech Talk reached out to them to identify ways in which pharmacy technicians can help patients select self-care products.

- **Providing basic product information:** "Technicians' scope of practice would allow them to gather information from the patient and discuss products as long as they are not giving a therapeutic recommendation," says Tario. "As a general rule of thumb, discussing information that is on a product label is within scope, but they should not give any advice to patients that requires a clinical assessment—for example, they could help a patient identify what drugs are in a particular product and review the labelled dose, but they should not give patient-specific advice about whether the product is right for them."
- **Collecting patient information:** "Technicians can gather relevant patient information, such as allergies, current medications, and medical conditions, which can be shared with the pharmacist," says Mendoza. "Technicians can facilitate the OTC consultation process by providing patients with consultation forms, ensuring they are filled out accurately, and inputting the information into the pharmacy's system."
- **Conducting follow-up:** "In my community pharmacy practice, we frequently rely on our technicians to follow up with patients about their medication experience," says Tario. "In these cases, they gather additional information about how the patient is doing and the pharmacist reviews it to ensure efficacy, safety and alleviate any other concerns the patient might have."
- **Referring to resources:** "Technicians can guide patients to additional resources, including QR codes or printed materials, that provide more in-depth information about OTC products," says Mendoza. "These resources can include official product websites, medication guides, or reputable health information sources."
- **Social media and marketing support:** Technicians can assist in managing the pharmacy's social media accounts and online presence, suggests Mendoza. They can help create and schedule posts about OTC products, health tips, promotions, and upcoming events.
- **Health and wellness events:** "Technicians are excellent resources for their community," says Tario. "There is no reason why they couldn't take part in outreach initiatives like public speaking, advertising, etc." Technicians can assist in organizing and hosting health and wellness events or workshops within the community, adds Mendoza. "These events can focus on topics related to OTC products, such as skincare, nutrition, or pain management."

When to call on the pharmacist

"Technicians are an asset to the pharmacist when they can efficiently and thoroughly gather information about the patient and their situation, but must defer to the pharmacist to complete the assessment and determine the best course of action," says Tario.

Mendoza suggests some situations in which technicians should consult the pharmacist:

- **Potential drug interactions:** If there is a possibility of an interaction between the OTC product and a patient's prescription drugs;
- **Allergies or adverse reactions:** If a patient mentions allergies or has experienced adverse reactions to medications or OTC products in the past;
- **Special Populations:** If the patient is in a special population, such as pregnant or breastfeeding women, children, or the elderly;
- **Concerns about chronic conditions:** Patients with chronic health conditions or complex medical histories may have unique requirements when selecting OTC products.

"In general, pharmacy technicians should use their judgment to assess the complexity of the patient's request or question," says Mendoza. "If there is any doubt about the appropriateness or safety of an OTC product for a particular patient, it's best to involve the pharmacist."

ENHANCING EXPERTISE

Dr. Allison Tario says there are so many opportunities for additional education and training for pharmacy technicians. "Technicians are regulated health professionals with an obligation to keep their knowledge and expertise current; if someone has a particular area of interest, I would definitely encourage them to seek out additional learning opportunities."

For example, technicians could "learn about allergens commonly found in medications and skin-care products, as well as products designed for individuals with allergies or sensitivities," suggests Dr. Kris Mendoza. Another potential area is lifestyle and wellness, where techs could provide information on general wellness, including tips for a healthy lifestyle, nutrition, exercise, and stress management.

BY THE NUMBERS

Canadians are suffering from 'vaccine fatigue'

Those with "moderate" to "very high" vaccine fatigue: **54%**

Those planning to get a flu shot this season: **54%**

Those planning to get a COVID-19 booster this fall: **47%**

Those "at least somewhat familiar" with respiratory syncytial virus (RSV): **32%**

60+ year-olds who would likely get the RSV vaccine if it's available to them: **56%**

Source: Vaccine Intentions Among Canadians, Canadian Pharmacists Association, August 2023