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Pharmacy Technicians: A Prescription for Success

June 04, 2008 By Thomas A. Hauck

Science has made many wonderful contributions to our quality of life, and near the top of the list are modern pharmaceuticals. Nowadays we have access to many effective prescription drugs that can add years to our lives. If you enjoy helping people lead healthier lives through scientific advances, you might want to consider training to become a pharmacy technician.

Many people are confused about the differences between pharmacists, pharmacy aides, and pharmacy technicians. Let's have a look.

Pharmacists distribute prescription drugs to individuals. They also provide advice to patients, physicians, and other health practitioners on the selection, interactions, dosages, and side effects of medications. Pharmacists must earn a Pharm.D. degree from an accredited college or school of pharmacy. A license to practice pharmacy is required in all states, all U.S. territories, and the District of Columbia.

Pharmacy aides perform administrative duties in pharmacies; they cannot handle prescription drugs. They may be clerks or cashiers who answer telephones, stock shelves, handle money, and perform other clerical duties. Pharmacy aides may maintain patient files, prepare insurance claim forms, and stock and take inventory of supplies and medications. Most pharmacy aides have a high school diploma and are trained on the job—but according to the U.S. Government, job opportunities for pharmacy aides are declining.*

Pharmacy technicians help licensed pharmacists provide medication and other health care products to patients. Technicians perform some of the same administrative tasks as pharmacy aides, such as answering phones, stocking shelves, and operating cash registers. Unlike pharmacy aides, technicians also help prepare prescribed medication.

Technicians must retrieve, measure, and sometimes mix the medication. They may select the type of prescription container, prepare the prescription labels, and affix the prescription and auxiliary labels to the container. Technicians price and file the prescription, which is then checked by a pharmacist before it is given to the patient. They refer any questions regarding prescriptions, drug information, or health matters to the pharmacist.

How about certification? Two organizations administer national certification examinations—the Pharmacy Technician Certification Board and the Institute for the Certification of Pharmacy Technicians. Certification requirements vary—it's required by some states and employers, and is voluntary in some states.

Employers tend to favor applicants who have completed formal training and certification. Education programs and certification highlight the technician's proficiency, knowledge, and dedication to the work. Formal education programs are offered by the military, some hospitals, proprietary schools, vocational or technical colleges, and community colleges. Many quality programs that offer relevant skills, such as health and chemistry, can be found right here on EducationForCareers.com.

The job outlook is good. According to the U.S. Government, employment of pharmacy technicians is expected to increase by 32 percent in the current decade from 2006 to 2016, which is much faster than the average for all occupations. Good job prospects are anticipated for full-time and part-time work, particularly for technicians with formal training or previous experience.**

As the baby boomer generation ages, demand for prescription medications will almost certainly increase. Continued scientific advances should bring treatments for an increasing number of conditions, and consequently more pharmacy technicians will be needed to fill a growing number of prescriptions. Perhaps you could be part of the trend with a rewarding career as a pharmacy technician.

*Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2008-09 Edition*, Pharmacy Aides, on the Internet at <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos274.htm> (visited May 22, 2008).

**Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2008-09 Edition*, Pharmacy Technicians, on the Internet at <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos252.htm> (visited May 22, 2008).