

*As part of our ongoing support of Pharmacy, Pharmaceutical Partners of Canada Inc. is proud to bring you a special in-depth interview with David Hill, Executive Director of the Canadian Council for Accreditation of Pharmacy Programs.*



**David Hill**  
Executive Director of the  
Canadian Council for  
Accreditation of  
Pharmacy Programs

## **Registration of Pharmacy Technicians and the Accreditation of Pharmacy Technician Programs:**

# **What will they mean for pharmacy in Canada?**

**These programs represent an important step forward for pharmacy technicians, and for the profession as a whole.**

As the role of pharmacists evolves towards providing clinical care and overseeing drug therapy, pharmacy technicians will be able to step up to the important task of dispensing medications. But in order for pharmacists and pharmacy technicians to expand their scopes of practice within our healthcare system there must be the assurance that pharmacy technicians are well trained to take more responsibility for traditional dispensing duties. This requires a national standard of regulation that would hold pharmacy technicians to a uniform standard, and allow them to expand their scope of practice to include many of the duties now assigned to pharmacists.

David Hill, Executive Director of the Canadian Council for Accreditation of Pharmacy Programs (CCAPP), worked to establish a much needed national accreditation system for the training programs for pharmacy technicians. We spoke to him recently to discuss the challenges and opportunities of this important initiative.

## Dr. Hill, what was behind this move towards the national accreditation of pharmacy technician training programs?

“Accreditation is the measure of the quality of college training programs on a national level. Educators wanted an accreditation program to bring some order to how the education of pharmacy technicians was occurring across the country. Each province had their own standards, and indeed each college had their own standards, but there was no national standard for good quality pharmacy technician education programs.”

“I’ve heard community pharmacists say that a good pharmacy technician can make or break a business. But until now it’s been somewhat of a crapshoot for pharmacists when they hire pharmacy technicians as to whether they’re going to be any good. When a hospital or a pharmacy chain needs a pharmacist, they know that grads from Dalhousie, the University of Alberta or BC are all going to be equally competent, but we don’t have that level of confidence with pharmacy technician graduates. What you end up with is a pharmacy group or a hospital saying ‘We will only take graduates from this program, but not from that program.’ So you’ve got a huge educational resource out there producing graduates for which the profession has very little assurance that they’re all competent. As the accrediting body, CCAPP is trying to bring every program body to a convergence of predictable quality.”



## How did the process begin?

“The Accreditation Council was asked by many of its stakeholders to investigate whether or not it could develop a pharmacy technician program accreditation process. The CCAPP board approached it from three points of view: first, national standards of competency needed to be developed; second, educational outcomes needed to be developed; and third, there had to be a business case that would permit CCAPP to take this on and actually provide sufficient revenue to cover the cost of doing it without transferring the expenses over to the university side, which could not be expected to be responsible for an accreditation program for the college system. Between 2005 and 2007 these issues were addressed, and CCAPP was able to begin the process.”

## What are the goals, and how does the accreditation process work?

“If you look at the work of the recently completed *Moving Forward* projects, the study of the human resources needs for pharmacy in Canada and the *Blueprint for Pharmacy* vision, the ultimate goal is to have a scope of practice for pharmacy technicians that allows them to do much of the dispensing that pharmacists are now responsible for. That requires a competent individual who has completed a standardized training program, and credentials that meet national expectations. There will be a national certification examination set by the Pharmacy Examining Board of Canada that will become the entry point for pharmacy technicians to become registered and regulated by each of the provincial pharmacy regulatory authorities. And in order for pharmacy technicians to write the national certification examination they will have to have come out of an accredited pharmacy technician training program. The result will be a consistent stream of people, all trained to the same level, writing a national examination. The whole structure of the process will be very similar to what currently exists for pharmacists.”

### **Who benefits from the accreditation of pharmacy technicians?**

“There are several beneficiaries. Current and future students benefit because they will have a measure of the quality of programs and will be able to use that indicator to decide whether or not they’re going to apply for admission. It also gives them a measure of confidence that the program they’re entering meets a national standard. Government and the private sector benefit as well, in that accreditation provides a level of assessment of the investment of public funds or expenditures by students for tuition. The profession benefits too, because graduates will meet standards that improve the profession. And lastly, the general public benefits because they’ll have confidence that the people moving into the healthcare field are highly trained, accountable, and bound by a code of ethics. The public will now be able to go into a pharmacy and see the pharmacist as part of a clinical drug care team, whose principal responsibility will be to help patients obtain the optimum benefit from drug therapy, with less concern for performing technical dispensing tasks.”

### **Will high school students now need to meet certain prerequisites to get into college courses?**

“Yes. At one time, if you had the tuition and could pass the college interview process, you just signed on the dotted line and moved forward to take the program. Now all accredited programs will have to have a meaningful admissions process. Students must have upper level high school science and math courses, a set standard of English or French language fluency, keyboarding skills, and a criminal record background check. Programs will also have to try to assess whether there’s a good match between the nature of the job role and the aptitude of prospective students to enter this field. Pharmacy technicians work in fast-paced, team-oriented environments, with zero tolerance for errors. We want to make sure the colleges are bringing people into the profession who can function in these settings.”

### **How will the regulation of pharmacy technicians impact pharmacists in terms of them being able to broaden their scope of practice to include more clinical duties?**

“The profession of pharmacy has made some very significant commitments to the Canadian healthcare system in terms of what the role of pharmacists will be in the future. Pharmacists will be doing much more in terms of clinical patient work and drug therapy management. But if the pharmacist is chained to a dispensary counter 8 hours a day there’s no way she or he can review a patient’s therapy or develop a care plan or make recommendations to physicians and other health care professionals. The only way they can do that is by turning dispensing duties over to a well educated pharmacy technician who can add value to the profession of pharmacy, who has an expected level of knowledge and skill, as well as the legal authority to do more than before. In other words, appropriately qualified pharmacy technicians will free up time for pharmacists to pursue more direct patient care services.”

### **What are the challenges or hurdles that could hold some of these changes back?**

“One of the big areas is the fact that many of the therapy management responsibilities that the profession wants pharmacists to be able to do are not yet billable services. Until pharmacies find a way to negotiate a fee for service there’s not a great incentive for pharmacists to provide them. The Canadian healthcare system and patients have gotten a very good deal from pharmacists in terms of the amount of free care that’s provided to patients. A patient can go to most pharmacies in the country, spend time discussing a medication problem and get good health care information. At this time, the pharmacist has no way of being reimbursed for that service.”

### **Is there a move afoot to find a way to compensate pharmacists for these services?**

“Yes, the pharmacy advocacy associations in every province – the Ontario Pharmacy Association, the BC Pharmacy Association etc. all have initiatives in place that involve the negotiation of different reimbursement models for pharmacist services. Pharmacy technicians can free up time for pharmacists to do more of what they’re capable of, and in time pharmacists will be compensated for these additional duties.”



### **What were the biggest challenges in implementing this new accreditation process?**

“There were a number of challenges. One is that the colleges made a strong statement to CCAPP that they did not want university level accreditation standards applied to the college system. So we zeroed in on the key elements of the standards that were appropriate for the college-level programs. The length of pharmacy technician programs varied across Canada from 24 weeks to two full academic years. As the accrediting body we had to determine what would be a reasonable program length, given the variabilities that existed in how each province regulated its public and private college systems. We also had to build accreditation standards around benchmarks such as the National Association of Pharmacy Regulatory Authorities entry, to practice competencies for pharmacy technicians and the Canadian Pharmacy Technician Educators’ Association educational outcomes for pharmacy technician program graduates.”

“Also, many pharmacy technicians programs were focused on one area of practice – such as only for retail pharmacy – but our stakeholders wanted technicians to have the skills for all areas of practice, including hospital pharmacy. That’s how CCAPP approaches the accreditation of our degree programs. Pharmacists graduate from Canadian pharmacy schools not as community pharmacists or hospital pharmacists but as pharmacists. So we had to make it clear that the pharmacy technician curriculum had to include hospital pharmacy, community pharmacy and LTC pharmacy knowledge and skills.”

“The third area of challenge for CCAPP was on the student admissions criteria and instructor credentials and qualifications. We had to make sure that the students in a pharmacy technician program were academically qualified to take this training and that the instructors teaching in all accredited programs had the expertise and qualifications to deliver a high quality educational program.”

### **What does this mean to people currently working as pharmacy technicians?**

“The various provincial regulatory authorities have been holding focus groups and regional meetings of pharmacy technicians to bring them up to speed with what’s coming. Existing pharmacy technicians will likely have to complete the national certification examinations, and perhaps bridging programs, to become registered pharmacy technicians. ‘Registered Pharmacy Technician’ will become a protected title in some provinces, and people who do not go through the registration process will probably have to change their job title to something else, such as Pharmacy Assistant. They may also have their duties modified, because some of those duties will only be permitted to be performed by registered pharmacy technicians. I anticipate that many community pharmacies will still hire pharmacy assistants or people who are not registered pharmacy technicians, likely in pharmacies that are moving more cautiously in providing broader authority for their pharmacists to provide fee-generating drug therapy management services, or in providing more services for their patients as a competitive business strategy.”

### **Will registered pharmacy technicians earn more money? And if so, where will that money come from?**

“Most hospitals currently pay pharmacy technicians higher salaries compared to community practice, so there may not be much room to move in hospitals, in the short term, but there could be and should be a considerable up-side for

salaries in community pharmacies. The money will come from two sources. First, pharmacies should be able to reallocate labour time, and move some of their pharmacist labour costs to technicians. The other thing is the new duties which will be assumed by pharmacists, involving clinical drug management, chronic disease management and clinical care. It is expected that there will eventually be direct billing to insurance plans or patients for these legitimate pharmacist services. For example, in Ontario there is the MedsCheck program that pays pharmacists to do annual reviews of the drug therapy of residents in Ontario. That's a new reimbursement opportunity that pharmacists have in that province and similar initiatives will emerge in the others."

### **What will be the impact on the pharmacy profession when all of this comes to pass?**

"We currently have 25,000 pharmacists in this country who are not being efficiently used in the Canadian healthcare system. They represent a huge resource of knowledge that could be more fully utilized in decision making, drug therapy management and the direct care of patients. That's just not happening right now because too many pharmacists are still behind dispensing counters. They're capable of providing a very high level of care, and that can be facilitated by well trained and pharmacy technicians taking over many of the current duties of pharmacists."

### **What would you say to young people who want to become pharmacy technicians?**

"Any young person coming out of high school, or adult looking for a career change, who wants to study in a pharmacy technician program can be assured that because of the accreditation process there will be a predictable level of quality in all programs – it will no longer be a roll of the dice as to whether the payment of \$10,000 in tuition fees will turn out to be a good education investment. There will also be more status within the pharmacy, more responsibility, and the potential for higher pay. The registered pharmacy technician will truly be recognized as a new profession and an excellent career rather than simply an occupation."

### **In 2010 the first provinces will register and regulate pharmacy technicians. What will happen in the years after that?**

I expect this will be long term change for the profession—one that evolves over the next 5 to 10 years. I don't see a huge disruption in how pharmacy conducts its business, in the short term. There are 25,000 pharmacy technicians out there, many of whom will want to become registered. There will have to be a large number of testing centres set up by PEBC across the country to administer the evaluating and qualifying examinations, as well as clinical performance exams for pharmacy technicians. The logistics of that are huge. I don't think there will be any "grandfathering" of certification or registration— no one will be able to get the credential just by mailing an application and saying they want to move from this level to the next.

"In my mind, the big question is, will pharmacy step up to the plate and actually take advantage of the expanded scope of practice for registered pharmacy technicians? If I go into any of the big pharmacy chains and hospitals and ask 'What changes are you planning to implement in your pharmacy operations come 2010 as a result of the regulation of technicians?' and if I see a lot of shuffling of feet and hear a lot of generalities about maybe this or maybe that, I'll be very disappointed. I think pharmacy will be missing a real opportunity to push the profession forward."



**David Hill received his education in Pharmacy and business administration from the University of British Columbia, and his Ed.D. from Brigham Young University. He is a Fellow of the Canadian Society of Hospital Pharmacists. He was named Executive Director of the Canadian Council for Accreditation of Pharmacy Programs in 2006. Dr. Hill is also chair of the Blueprint for Pharmacy: Vision for Pharmacy in Canada task force. The Blueprint is a high level multi-organizational collaboration of national and provincial pharmacy organizations formed to create a strategic action plan for the future of the pharmacy profession in Canada.**