Specialist groups have long offered support for pharmacists to develop themselves professionally. What have been lacking are universal frameworks for ensuring competence at advanced levels of practice.

**Accreditation of advanced practice is on the horizon**

By Gareth Malson, MRPharmS

Mrs Jones sits quietly in her hospital bed waiting for the doctors to do their rounds. Three doctors approach: one a consultant, one a specialist registrar and one a house officer. Such is the structure of doctors’ postgraduate development that, without thinking about it too hard, Mrs Jones could work out who is top dog. Pharmacists, on the other hand, are not blessed with the same recognisable career structure.

NHS pharmacists are offered career progression through Agenda for Change banding but promotion is not linked formally to a mechanism for recognising advanced and specialist practice (with the exception of consultant pharmacist posts, for those living south of Hadrian’s Wall and east of the River Severn). Community pharmacists, it could be argued, have even less structure for them to develop as practitioners.

The topic of advanced and specialist practice was raised at this year’s United Kingdom Clinical Pharmacy Association autumn symposium, held in Stratford-upon-Avon on 13–15 November. “At the point of registration, we are regulated,” said Catherine Duggan, UKCPA chairman. “So anything that takes place after day 1 of practice could be considered ‘advanced’. However, many [pharmacists] know that advanced practice looks a bit different, feels a bit different and, actually, is a bit different.

“It’s about your life experiences, your acquisition of knowledge, your ability to transfer that knowledge into skills and to understand how to manage complexity in a patient setting, or a management setting, or an industry setting, or any setting you so wish.”

Developing a career structure for pharmacists is one of the commitments made by the new professional body. The work has been entrusted to the advanced and specialist practice project team — part of the transitional working group created to develop the new professional body. Judging by presentations made at national conferences during the past month, this work is starting to take shape.

**Member designations**

At a recent Guild of Healthcare Pharmacists procurement and distribution interest group symposium (held in Birmingham on 12 November), plans for categorising different levels of practice were described by Ian Simpson, chief executive of the College of Pharmacy Practice. He revealed that the transitional working group had endorsed the general level framework and the advanced and consultant level framework developed by the Competency Development and Evaluation Group (CoDEG) as the basis for identifying advanced and specialist practice. He suggested that curricula produced by specialist groups, using CoDEG’s frameworks as a foundation, would be used as tools for assessing pharmacists who are working at advanced or specialist levels. Pharmacists who join the professional body will, he claimed, be able to enrol with a specialist group of their choosing.

“To be accredited at a higher level of practice, pharmacists will have the option to submit a portfolio of evidence to their specialist group,” Mr Simpson suggested. “The role of the specialist group will be to create a curriculum, decide what evidence is needed and then assess the individuals to make sure they have reached the appropriate standard of skills, knowledge and competence.”

Mr Simpson also told the audience that proposals for how...
professional designations (essentially a title given to pharmacists working at a particular level) could be used to identify higher levels of practice were agreed during a recent transitional working group meeting. Royal Pharmaceutical Society Chief Executive and Registrar Jeremy Holmes confirmed that the proposals would be subject to consultation with stakeholders and the profession. “We are looking at a number of ways in which it will be possible to support and recognise competence and experience in advanced and specialist practice,” said Mr Holmes. “What Mr Simpson has discussed is a part of that process.”

Mr Simpson speculated on how one potential system, involving three professional designations for higher-level practice, might take shape (see Figure, adjacent). The plans will not be finalised until next year.

Specialist groups Back at the UKCPA event, Dr Duggan gave delegates an update on the development of specialist curricula. Several pharmacy groups have been adapting the CoDEG frameworks to produce curricula that are specific to their sphere of practice. Those specialties for which curricula are completed, being developed or currently being considered are listed in the Box below.

Dr Duggan, who from January 2010 will become director of professional development and support at the Society, believes that many of the criteria described in CoDEG’s frameworks are proving to be applicable to most specialist curricula. However, she made clear that certain skills would be specific to particular specialisms. She added that by accrediting pharmacists against these curricula, employers would have a robust and consistent system for determining a practitioner’s competence. The same system will also provide assurance to patients and to practitioners themselves: “Sometimes you just want to know that you’re good at your job.”

What’s in a name? 
Responding to Dr Duggan’s address, Guild of Healthcare Pharmacists president Richard Cattell expressed concerns, identified through research, that the public does not recognise the word “advanced” in the context of a healthcare professional’s level of experience. “We need to get the language right because we’ll need to persuade the public, and we’ll need to persuade the regulator, that there’s some value behind it,” he asserted.

He also warned that the number of specialties listed by Dr Duggan might be too large for a “small profession”, such as pharmacy, to maintain and called for this to be a subject for professional debate. Dr Duggan agreed and reiterated that the high level of consistency between the curricula produced by the various specialist groups suggested there is scope for closer working between specialisms when developing the standards.

A new career structure, which nurtures and encourages higher levels of practice, is being developed for all pharmacists. Employers of pharmacists in all sectors will hopefully see the benefit of, and endorse, the concept of professional designations. That way, in the future, our Mrs Jones may have a better understanding about the levels of experience of the pharmacists who cross her path.

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### Potential pharmacy specialisms

- Cardiology
- Community practice
- Critical care
- Diabetes
- Education and development
- Elderly care
- Gastrointestinal
- HIV
- Infection management
- Leadership development
- Medicines information
- Mental Health
- Nutrition
- Oncology
- Ophthalmology
- Paediatrics
- Pain management
- Primary care
- Procurement
- Quality and risk management
- Respiratory
- Renal
- Quality assurance
- Surgery and theatres
- Technical services

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