Professional recognition in pharmacy: part 1 — demystifying the concepts

In this first of two articles, Catherine Duggan, the Royal Pharmaceutical Society’s director of professional development and support, describes how the RPS and other professional groups are working towards a vision for professional educational development and recognition for pharmacists after registration.

We are all aware we face huge challenges to manage the economic efficiencies outlined in the recent White Paper “Equity and excellence: liberating the NHS”. It outlined some core plans for the NHS in England that also resonate across Scotland and Wales. Although implementation may look different in the three countries, the phrase “doing more with less” is the current rhetoric for the whole of Great Britain.

Pharmacy is a resourceful profession and many innovations in service delivery have brought benefits to patients and the public over the years. However, the profession needs to demonstrate the evidence of these benefits and communicate them effectively to policy makers while ensuring that the pharmacy workforce is appropriately supported to deliver new services across sectors.

The main arguments for developing and advancing practice across all sectors are:

• Adaptability — the ability to adapt and respond to a changing healthcare environment
• Flexibility — to enable a flexible, adaptable and capable workforce
• Demonstrability — the ability to demonstrate the benefits of pharmacy to the public, patients and politicians

Underpinning these arguments is the need for a robust process of recognition to support professional development and advancement that fits across all sectors and levels of practice, for the benefit of patients, the public and the profession.

Entry to the pharmacy profession is through the registration examination. By passing it and subsequently registering with pharmacy’s regulator, the General Pharmaceutical Council, individuals may use the protected title “pharmacist”. Members of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society may use the post-nominals “MRPharmS”. But pharmacy has no consistent way of recognising subsequent advancement in practice (other than being an independent prescriber). Yet such recognition is common in other healthcare professions.

If, like other healthcare professions, pharmacy had a credible career ladder, this could lead to many benefits, not least a robust and transparent process to support pharmacist practitioners who:

• Are good at the level they are at and want to move on and advance, either towards specialism and expertise, or to demonstrate their competence at the level at which they practise (and in the longer term, for revalidation)
• Need access to a programme of professional development relevant to their “beyond day one” practice
• Want quality assured evidence of competence at an advanced level for themselves, their patients, their employers, and commissioners of pharmaceutical care services
• Want rewards with their career, including promotion and job satisfaction

In terms of adaptability, flexibility, and demonstrability, it is of interest to observe that other healthcare royal colleges provide:

• Clearly signposted knowledge, skills and experience — professional curricula that are relevant accessible and applicable
• Clearly signposted education support and development, with accredited and quality assured materials and modes
• Clear, quality assured and credible processes of recognition — “the credentials” of the individual practitioner

In this way, members of other professional bodies embark on continuous educational development themselves, and this is linked directly to their professional careers. It is aspirational, supportive and enabling, with career paths and maps that follow throughout their professional lives (in most cases, their specialist training).

The Academy of Medical Royal Colleges has been considering proposals for credentialing as part of doctors’ continuing professional development. In line with the General Medical Council specialist register review group, it recognises four key factors that have prompted the development of the concept of credentialing:

• The general appetite for more information about the status and competence of medical practitioners
• The changing nature of healthcare delivery
• The need to ensure that postgraduate medical training equips professionals to care for patients now and in the future, and that this training can be shown to enable doctors or health care professionals to be fit for this purpose
• The need to promote continuing professional development

The Academy has also considered the need for doctors to pursue professional educational development after registration. In partnership with the practitioner-led existing specialist groups in pharmacy (see Panel), the RPS is working to enable pharmacists to pursue professional educational development after registration. Professional educational development should encompass developing and advancing one’s practice.

This vision is driven by an aspirational approach to support and recognise advanced levels of practice, actively supporting a capable, flexible and sustainable workforce that is able to respond and deliver high quality services across the NHS, industry and academic sectors.

The RPS aims to harmonise the processes across different interests, sectors and specialisms in pharmacy and ensure that this
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vision properly describes the support required for advancement (rather than specialisation) for all pharmacists, wherever they practise. This is not an elitist approach: for example, the GMC for medicine recognises the credentials awarded by a healthcare royal college as a sign that a professional standard has been met, and that individuals have demonstrated that they have achieved an advanced level of practice and are able to manage complex healthcare situations competently. The risks to more complex patients are reduced by having a more experienced, knowledgeable and skilled professional dealing with their care.

What does the terminology mean?
There are three elements associated with professional recognition in other healthcare professions:

- Identification of the knowledge, skills and experiences (curricula for advanced practice)
- Education, training and support to contribute to knowledge and skills (signposting and accreditation)
- Consistent, quality assured recognition of an individual's attainment of the required knowledge and skills (the "credentialing" process).

The term “professional curriculum”
There is a need to describe and define the knowledge (including experiential knowledge), skills and relevant experiences that an individual could provide as "evidence" of advancing one's practice — defined here as the "professional curriculum". Evidence-based frameworks and curricula already exist which can support practitioners and signpost to the various specialists in the profession who have identified the knowledge and skills required in a particular area of practice. Having a recognised way to identify these would be essential in order to achieve the previously mentioned objectives of adaptability, flexibility and demonstrability for the profession.

Indeed, flexibility is at the core of such an approach. Many of the specialist curricula developed by the practitioner groups have common, or "core", content and themes that allow an advanced practitioner to manage the pharmacotherapy of any patient without having to retrain within specialist "silos".

Identifying what is common between specialties will allow the development of professional curricula for advanced general practice, which is needed across both hospital and community settings.

The term “accreditation”
Common use of the term “accreditation” refers to the independent kite marking provided for regulated courses such as the MPharm and preregistration training year. In many professions, having accredited materials, courses and post-registration education is "recognised" by regulators and becomes the standard needed to deliver services above those of "usual" practice.

In pharmacy this is often referred to as “day 1 practice”.
Healthcare professionals undertake education and development courses for their individual professional development over and above the minimum statutory standards which they are required to hold by their regulators.

Another use of the term refers to endorsement, which is increasingly sought by independent providers of professional development resources who value the independence of professional leadership bodies in adjudicating on the quality standards of their offerings. Conferring this transparent endorsement demonstrates to recipients that they are experiencing high quality training. The resources provided by an organisation should warrant accreditation from a professional body as part of the continuous improvement in the quality of the services they provide.

The term "credentialing”
“Credentialing” is a process that identifies when a defined set of knowledge, skills and experiences has been met at a defined standard of practice, and where an individual is able to demonstrate this against a consistent method of assessment. It is a process used by many organisations and agencies nationally and internationally to assure that those who practise beyond their registration qualifications meet all the necessary requirements to deliver services relating to their roles and responsibilities.

Credentials should comprise a collection of abilities, which might be equivalent to the outcome of one to several years of professional development. As services change and develop, the expertise required to deliver the services will change, and credentialing is a process that can assure that this is done to a nationally agreed professional standard, best defined by the peer group.

Purpose of professional recognition
Professional recognition for pharmacists is not the same as professional regulation (although it could be used to support any future regulation of advanced practice). Regulation is about minimum standards, whereas credentialing is an aspirational and educational process. Professional recognition (through robust models of credentialing) has the following purposes for pharmacy practitioners:

- It provides evidence that patient safety — in the context of pharmaceutical care — is being addressed
- It enhances the quality of pharmaceutical care by recognising or evaluating the core competencies or key performance indicators expected of a practitioner at a defined level of practice
- It will provide evidence of the performance characteristics for any practitioner at a defined level of practice (in any specialty within a profession)
- It will incentivise continued development, alignment of education and development to professional practice for all practitioners for reasons of professional altruism rather than direct regulation (eg, solely through the submission of CPD records)
- It will provide opportunities for continued advancement of practice and open up new practice and scientific development opportunities for professionals
- It will encourage the formation of useful communities of practice (through national groups and locally via RPS local practice forums) and opportunities for enhanced and effective networking between peers

How does it all fit together?
Healthcare practitioners often undertake education and professional development in order to deliver (or continue to deliver) an advanced level service or to attain an advanced level of practice. This provision is usually accredited by professional bodies and recognised by regulators. For example, a pharmacist might undertake a course accredited by the RPS that will enable him or her to deliver an accredited service. Such an advanced service may require advanced knowledge and skills, and the pharmacist is able to present his or her credentials as proof of this. Consequently, the pharmacist's credentials are proof that he or she is practising at the required level and can be deemed as more capable (and therefore less risky) to deliver this service at the point of commissioning.

In the next paper we will describe in more detail the process of professional recognition and address the benefits to practitioners working in various settings.

Pharmacists need access to:

- A career path
- Appropriate cross-sector professional development frameworks
- The post-registration knowledge skills and experience needed to advance to deliver services to more complex patients and populations
- Accredited services
- Recognised credentials or professional designations

Providing these should be the blueprint for professional development for pharmacy. The RPS and the organisations listed in the Panel are all working in partnership to share knowledge and experience around all elements of professional recognition to develop and deliver this blueprint in practice.