Who benefits from having pharmacy technicians in more advanced roles?

By Andy Walsh

Being a pharmacist can be stressful. You always have a hundred and one things to do, but never enough time. Thankfully you are not alone in your endeavours thanks to the support of pharmacy technicians, particularly in hospitals, who lend a hand daily with patients and their medicines.

Over the past few years the responsibilities that pharmacy technicians undertake have advanced considerably. This role development could potentially benefit not only technicians, but pharmacists and hospital care also.

New roles

"Pharmacy technicians started off putting tablets in bottles but we are now taking on more advanced roles as the responsibilities of both technicians and pharmacists have changed," says Fiona Price, secretary for the Association of Pharmacy Technicians UK.

The reason for the original shift in responsibilities, Mrs Price believes, was that pharmacists had less time for dispensing as their roles advanced; therefore pharmacy technicians were expected to take on new advanced responsibilities, provided they were competent in the role.

Tracey Tugwell, a pharmacy technician working for the Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, echoes these sentiments: "Originally I was working in a dispensary and preparing medicines. The role has developed due to nationally changing roles of hospital pharmacy technicians and the way that we felt the inpatient unit warranted a change."

Ray Lyon is chief pharmacist at the same mental health trust. He explains how roles have developed in a mental health setting: "We have some clinical technicians who spend most of the day on wards. Some of our technicians are embedded in the units rather than an actual pharmacy."

The kinds of roles pharmacy technicians in his trust are now undertaking include medicines reconciliation, educating patients about their medicines and running training sessions for nurses.

Professional registration

So, how do pharmacy technicians demonstrate they are competent and have the skills to take on such responsibilities?

All pharmacy technicians are now required to be registered with the General Pharmaceutical Council and, like pharmacists, demonstrate that they have undertaken at least nine examples of continuing professional development a year.

One of the key roles that APTUK fulfils is "supporting the technicians in their role development, including how to produce CPD records", according to Mrs Price, who has been a pharmacy technician in Wales for over 27 years. In her view, this support from APTUK is an acknowledgment that pharmacy technicians are now taking on more advanced roles and therefore greater professional responsibility.

Pharmacist relief

Pharmacists are also seeing the benefits of advanced roles for technicians. By tackling some of the more time-consuming tasks that pharmacists previously undertook, pharmacy technicians have allowed more time for pharmacists to develop their own responsibilities.

In Mr Lyon’s trust, pharmacy technicians have been able to perform first-line clinical screening, so pharmacists are only required to attend a ward some days, when there is an unusual or complex combination of medicines.

"Pharmacists can now spend more time with patients who have conditions that require a lot of attention,” he adds.

Mrs Tugwell builds on this: "Pharmacists now have more time to talk to patients about their medication in much more depth if they have any queries. Furthermore, pharmacists can get more involved with patient medication choice now.
that they no longer have to do
certain roles, such as first-time
clinical screening." She goes on to
explain that there are now more
opportunities for pharmacy
technicians to progress in the NHS,
particularly to band 6.

Sue Ladds, associate head of
pharmacy, clinical services, for
Western Sussex Hospitals NHS
Trust, has technicians on every ward
checking drug charts and who only
notify pharmacists when there is a
problem. "It saves a huge amount of
time since our pharmacists are now
reserved for things that technicians
can’t do, such as helping prescribers
and making recommendations for
treatment. They are also able to save
a lot of time at discharge by checking
what medicines the patient already
has and what needs to be dispensed."

Patient focus
It seems that improvements in
patient treatment and medicines
management are among the
advantages of having pharmacy
technicians in more clinical roles.
By having technicians on the wards
and spending time doing medicines
reconciliation, pharmacists have
more time to ensure the patients are
getting the best care possible.

"Pharmacists have been able to
improve patient care recently by
taking on more specialist roles
where previously there was no

pharmacy support at all, such as
early intervention services [for mental
health patients]," comments Mr Lyon.

This is a view that Mrs Price
shares: "In terms of patient care it is
about getting the right people in the
right role. The knowledge of
pharmacy technicians and
pharmacists has improved and so too
has patient care as a result. They can
now get a lot of the same healthcare
from a hospital pharmacy that you
would expect from a GP surgery due
to advancements in the roles of
technicians and pharmacists."

For Mrs Tugwell, a key benefit of
having pharmacy technicians in
more developed roles is an increase
in patient understanding of
pharmacy services, with a greater
pharmacy ward presence. In her
eyes, the education that pharmacy
technicians can give to patients is
also a role that is greatly beneficial
in terms of providing effective care.
"Patients can be on a variety of
different drugs, so it is important to
teach them how the drugs help so
that they adhere to the treatment."

Optimisation
Trusts are always trying to find new
ways to reduce costs so that patients
can receive the best healthcare
possible within their budget. Placing
technicians in more clinical roles is
a clear example of how trusts can
make the most out of the skill mix
available to improve patient care.

Mrs Price elaborates: "Although
it is not completely uncontroversial,
technicians do not cost as much as
pharmacists, so if they can take on
certain roles and free up more time
for the pharmacist, instead of having
to employ an additional pharmacist,
then it is much more cost effective."

With pharmacy technicians
taking on more advanced roles, is it
possible that technicians will have less
time for their original responsibilities
and more staff could need to be
employed? Mr Lyon’s trust did need
to employ additional pharmacy
technicians to undertake these wider
clinical roles. He adds: "Many trusts
won’t have clinical technicians at all,
or just for a few wards, and would
definitely need additional staff."

However, Mrs Ladds says: "As a
department, we don’t need to keep
increasing our pharmacy staff to
deal with the workload. We are now
able to ensure that the patient
experience is maintained without
employing more people, despite the
increase in demand on our services."

Future growth
Advancements in the responsibilities
of pharmacy technicians will
undoubtedly continue in the future.
And it seems that pharmacists will
be freed to expand into areas that
are currently lacking a pharmacy
presence.

However, Mrs Ladds says: "The
ways in which technicians and
pharmacists grow will vary from
trust to trust, driven by need or
some sort of problem that the
service is not meeting."

Mrs Tugwell goes further: "It all
comes down to cost and how much a
trust is willing to pay for that
service." For her, personally, she
cannot see her role developing
much more but envisions that
younger pharmacy technicians will
see further development of the
profession in the future. Yet she
warns: "There still has to be a
distinction between a pharmacist and
a technician due to the difference in
their knowledge and expertise."

In the mental health setting, Mr
Lyon is keen to see technicians give
greater support with crisis teams, as
well as provide further education for
patients and healthcare professionals.
For him the message is clear: "Look
at the full potential of the pharmacy
technicians you work with and let
them grow."