

Council of Deans Chairman's Section

Pharmacy Student Enrollment as a Function of Laws and Regulations on Pharmacy Technicians

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There has been unprecedented demand for entry into our pharmacy education programs. Schools and colleges of pharmacy have several applicants for each position in the entering class. The qualifications for entry have markedly increased in the past several years. The entry grade point averages and SAT scores have increased. Admissions committees are having increasing difficulty in distinguishing among qualified applicants. Enrollment in prepharmacy curricula have increased while enrollments in many other programs on campus are experiencing marked declines in enrollment.

This increased demand for our programs is a direct function of the demand for our graduates. The mean salaries for entry level pharmacists is over \$50,000 a year in many states. Most of our graduates have multiple offers and can choose from a variety of practice settings and geographical locations. This demand has not gone unnoticed by universities without pharmacy programs. I have heard of as many as ten new pharmacy schools in various stages of development.

The demand for pharmacists is driven by a number of factors but the most important is the opening of new pharmacies by the chain drug stores, grocery stores, and the mass merchandise stores. For every pharmacy that opens there is an employment opportunity for several pharmacists and the only predictable supply are the new graduates each year. Since it is dogma that location of the store is a prime factor in the probability for its success, the industry expands by increasing the number of stores rather than increasing the size of individual pharmacies. The only exception to this are mail order pharmacies which often employ fifty or more pharmacists at a single location.

There are indications that this demand is beginning to soften. Many of us are expecting reversals of this trend but are we ready for a sudden change? Will tuition driven programs be able to withstand a drop of enrollment by as much as fifty percent or more occurring in one or two years? In the past, the demand for pharmacy programs has varied gradually over a period of years but will this time be different?

The forces of change which would result in a sudden drop in demand for pharmacists are a combination of: (i) managed care pharmacy driven by the increased cost of pharmaceuticals, and (ii) technology which allows for accurate, rapid, and less expensive distribution of pharmaceuticals. The increased pressure by payors to deliver pharmaceuticals at a lower cost is forcing managed care organizations to insist that providers reduce the dispensing cost to the minimum. Competition among providers has led to the rapid expansion of mail order pharmacies which by extensive use of automated technology can dispense large (ninety day supply) maintenance medications at a much reduced cost.

This is happening now. Why then is the demand for pharmacists still so high? The demand is still high because state laws and regulations require that a licensed pharmacist perform functions that can readily be done by technology and technicians. State laws require that a pharmacist check each prescription for accuracy before it is dispensed. I recently toured a mail order pharmacy and witnessed twenty-five pharmacists on an assembly-line checking prescriptions coming off a conveyor belt against data concerning the prescription on a computer. The prescriptions had previously been filled by technicians using automated technology, including bar coded filling of prescription vials. The possibility for error was extremely remote.

In other practice settings, the technicians could also accurately perform most of the dispensing functions. However, many state laws limit the number of technicians which can be supervised by a pharmacist. This too keeps the demand for pharmacists at an elevated level.

The cost of having pharmacists with elevated salaries performing the technical operations of dispensing will not be ignored much longer. A bill was introduced in the Senate in Arizona which would assign responsibility for dispensing medications to technicians. It passed by an overwhelming margin. It was withdrawn in the House after the State Board of Pharmacy agreed to consider modification of the rule limiting the number of technicians to one for every pharmacist. If the state laws and regulations on limiting

the number and duties of technicians were lifted or reduced, the demand for pharmacists who primarily dispense medications would be markedly reduced. This could happen suddenly and abruptly.

The force of change which would increase the demand for pharmacists is the increasing role of the pharmacist in providing pharmaceutical care. The role of pharmacists in providing this care in the hospital and long-term care setting is well established. How quickly can this role be assumed in the community and outpatient setting? If the profession moves quickly and establishes the pharmacist as the primary provider of pharmaceutical care, this may largely offset the decreased demand which would occur by changing the laws and regulations regarding dispensing. The rate at which pharmacists can establish this role is a function of the rate at which payors can be convinced that it is cost-effective in the total health care of the patient to pay for this care.

Thus, the rate of change in our enrollments will be a function of how fast the laws and regulations concerning technicians change versus the rate at which pharmacists assume the role of providers of pharmaceutical care in the community setting. If the laws change before the role changes, the drop in demand could be precipitous. We as educators do not need to be victims as we witness these changes. We must be facilitators and catalysts for the expanding role of pharmacists in providing pharmaceutical care. Offering the PharmD degree as the single entry level degree is not enough. We need to become involved in facilitating change at the state level. We must work with state pharmacy associations and boards of pharmacy as they struggle with the forces of change affecting the profession. Not only is it the right thing to do for the profession, but it will have direct bearing upon our future enrollments.