

VIEWPOINTS

Preparing Our Students for the Many Opportunities in Pharmacy

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When I was finishing pharmacy school many years ago, my classmates and I spoke about our career options in simplistic terms of “community” or “hospital.” That choice determined much of what we would do for the next 30 years. Back then more so than now, pharmacy graduates fit into the professional mold, with only a few people striking out to pursue opportunities in industry or to further their education. This limited thinking has resulted in many older pharmacists now having restricted career options and some having low job satisfaction. The source for these problems include the way pharmacists have been taught for many years as well as individual career ambitions, expectations, and professional outlooks.

Fast forward to today when our pharmacy graduates have a wide range of opportunities. While many of our graduates still choose to practice in traditional community pharmacy and hospital positions, others have found rewarding careers in a wide variety of jobs, such as managers and leaders of health business enterprises, government agencies, and pharmaceutical industry. Also, we now often hear about recent pharmacy graduates with job titles such as “IT” pharmacist, patient safety pharmacist, public health pharmacist, antibiotic steward pharmacist, and even pharmacists as lifestyle coaches.

However, graduates’ career choices are still constrained by their limited knowledge and understanding of all the directions that are open to them and because of the way pharmacy education is channeled along traditional paths. All the changes in pharmacy, including the expanding role of technicians, automated dispensing systems, and mail-order and Internet pharmacies, will result in fewer pharmacists being needed in the future to fill prescriptions. As availability of these traditional roles contract, student thinking about career options should develop

to consider all the exciting opportunities that are now open to them.

The word “pharmacist” typically elicits in most peoples’ minds what is now an outdated image of a person putting pills in bottles. Clearly, perception has not kept up with the reality of modern pharmacy practice and roles. As career options continue to expand, the word “pharmacist” may even come to mean something different than it does today, and in fact, may have multiple meanings depending on the setting in which the health consumer encounters the pharmacist. As a result of these unprecedented changes, it is unclear what will be the unifying foundation of the pharmacy profession given that pharmacists have so many different functions.

The *Journal* provides many examples where colleges and schools of pharmacy have developed model programs for students to learn about new career opportunities. However, pharmacy educators do not consistently do an adequate job of making most graduates aware of all that is open to them in pharmacy. Opportunities go well beyond the roles that are within the traditional realm of pharmacy, with some of the most interesting being those where pharmacists use their knowledge and background to create new opportunities at the intersections of the pharmacy profession with other fields such as business, public health, law, nutrition, and information technology.

Pharmacy curriculums must better reflect the wide range of career directions that future graduates will take. Curriculums that only focus on preparing graduates to fit the mold of pharmacy “generalist” may produce graduates who are competent in many traditional functions but not in demand in the healthcare workforce of the future. Clearly, we need to do more to make students aware of their career choices with more discussion of new opportunities for pharmacists.