



Research

# Career preferences of Syrian students and their attitudes toward a number of practice areas: Will community pharmacy continue to dominate the profession?

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## Abstract

**Objective:** To investigate the short- and long-term career preferences of pharmacy students and evaluate the factors that influence their choices. Additionally, to explore attitudes of students toward community pharmacy, medical marketing, and clinical pharmacy.

**Methods:** A questionnaire instrument was developed and distributed to final-year pharmacy students at Damascus university during the 2010–2011 academic year.

**Results:** Two hundred sixty-five students participated in the study. Although significant differences in practice area preferences between short- and long-term were measured ( $p < 0.001$ ), community pharmacy and pharmaceutical industry were selected as the two most preferred future careers. The three most important factors influencing students' career choices were personal fulfillment, income, and funding capabilities. In comparison with community pharmacy, medical marketing was rated at a significantly lower rank in terms of meeting a pharmacist's knowledge and skills, satisfying his/her ambitions, enjoyability, and prestigiousness ( $p < 0.001$ ). About two-thirds of students strongly agreed that clinical pharmacy should be efficiently implemented in the Syrian healthcare system and half of them strongly agreed that they would choose it as a career if it was well-established in Syria. Remarkable inter-gender divergence was observed concerning preferred pharmacy practice sector and attitudes toward various practice areas.

**Conclusion:** As the number of community pharmacists continues to increase, many graduates may not have the opportunity to work in their most preferred practice area. Based on investigating market's needs, Syrian universities, policy makers as well as stakeholders may adapt new strategies for preparing future pharmacists and encouraging them to opt a job in other practice area.

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**Keywords:** Short- and long-term job preferences; Final-year students; Community pharmacy; Clinical pharmacy; Medical marketing

## Introduction

The pharmacy profession has undergone substantial evolution in terms of its scope of practice and pharmacist's roles and responsibilities.<sup>1</sup> In the past, the primary responsibility of a pharmacist was to compound and dispense medications and the profession practice was limited to two major practice settings, community and hospital pharmacies.

Nowadays, as pharmacy practice has advanced and become more focused on patient healthcare, career opportunities for pharmacists have expanded and a pharmacist can choose from a variety of professional settings. In spite of these facts, the current figures still show that the majority of pharmacists are working in community pharmacy settings.<sup>2–5</sup> The 2009 International Pharmaceutical Federation (FIP) Global Pharmacy Workforce Survey<sup>2</sup> that involved 56 countries representing approximately half of the world's population showed that, on average, 58% of pharmacists were working in retail community pharmacy. The 2008

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British Pharmacy Workforce Census<sup>3</sup> that included 30,517 registered pharmacists in Great Britain demonstrated that 71% of the respondents were working in community pharmacies. In surveys conducted in the United States (US)<sup>4</sup> comparing the proportion of actively practicing pharmacists working in all settings between 1990 and 2004, 55% of pharmacists were reported to be working in chain and independent community pharmacies. This was also confirmed by the 2009 national pharmacist workforce survey<sup>5</sup> that found that 52% of the respondents were working in community pharmacy settings.

Numerous surveys have been conducted to explore career intentions and preferred areas of practice among pharmacy students upon graduation. Many studies in western countries have demonstrated a tendency for pharmacy students to select community pharmacy as the most preferred career choice, followed by hospital pharmacy. An early survey<sup>6</sup> showed that the top practice intentions of pharmacy students in the US were chain and independent community pharmacy (45.5%) and hospital pharmacy (27.6%). In more recent studies, similar preferences were expressed by pharmacy students in Britain,<sup>7-9</sup> Finland,<sup>10</sup> New Zealand,<sup>10-12</sup> and US.<sup>13</sup> Unlike these findings, surveys in some other countries including Kuwait,<sup>10</sup> Malaysia,<sup>14</sup> and South Africa<sup>15</sup> found that the largest proportion of students preferred to work in hospital pharmacy. In addition, in Malaysia,<sup>14</sup> South Africa,<sup>15</sup> Sudan,<sup>10</sup> and Zimbabwe,<sup>10</sup> a considerable proportion of students hoped to be employed in pharmaceutical companies. It is noteworthy that other practice areas including research,<sup>11,14</sup> academia,<sup>10,11,14,15</sup> sales and marketing,<sup>14</sup> and regulatory affairs<sup>14</sup> either attracted only small percentages of students or were not even indicated in most of the previous studies. Interestingly, some studies<sup>9,11</sup> also provided evidence of possible changes to students' career intentions after several years of their degree. Although initial career plans are usually shaped before students start a pharmacy program, final career choice can be impacted by the content of the curriculum and new experiences including personal interactions with teachers including pharmacist-teachers and work experience or practice placements.<sup>9</sup> Several factors have been found to influence students' career preferences and intentions. Besier and Jang<sup>6</sup> reported that personal fulfillment, salary, and the opportunity to use one's abilities and education were the most important factors influencing pharmacy students' choice of a practice area. Carter and Segal<sup>16</sup> also found that "personally rewarding" was the most important factor for pharmacists working in community and hospital pharmacy settings in deciding their career. Other influencing factors including work environment, workload, career prospects, working hours, benefits and flexibility, friends, previous work experience, job satisfaction, and geographical location have also been suggested.<sup>8,9,13,14</sup>

The school of pharmacy at Damascus University was founded in 1962. It is the oldest and largest among pharmacy schools in Syria, with approximately 2200

undergraduate students enrolled in 2010. Additionally, its sixty plus professors have substantially contributed to setting up programs and carrying out academic and teaching activities in most schools of pharmacy around the country. The undergraduate Bachelor of Pharmacy (BPharm) degree, like all other pharmacy programs at the Syrian public universities, is a five-year semester-based program. Graduates can register with the Syrian Pharmacists Association immediately after graduation, but they need two years of experience in rural community pharmacy before they can work in urban community pharmacy. Community pharmacy in Syria appears to be the most predominant practice setting with 80% of registered pharmacists reported working in this practice setting.<sup>17</sup> The remaining 20% are distributed across all other practice areas including 6% working in medical marketing and sales, 3% in pharmaceutical industry, 3% in the public health sector, 2% in medical diagnosis laboratories, and 2% in academia. In addition, it is estimated that 4% are pursuing further study.<sup>17</sup> However, no estimate is available for pharmacist workforce in the area of clinical and hospital pharmacy because this practice setting is not yet well-established in the country. More importantly, pharmacy education and practice have recently undergone dramatic changes. The number of pharmacy schools has tripled since 2003, for a total of 12 schools. This was associated with a growth in the number of pharmacy graduates from roughly 650 in 2005 to more than 1200 graduates in 2010. Over the same years, the figure of registered pharmacists also jumped from approximately 13,000 up to more than 18,000. This generated a pharmacist to general population ratio of about 1:1300.<sup>17</sup> In addition, more than 60 pharmaceutical companies have opened up since 1990. Prior to this time only two government-owned pharmaceutical companies existed. It is not yet clear whether these transformations would influence career intentions of new graduates and cause changes to the current pharmacist workforce distribution in Syria. Additionally, it is highly important to examine students' career trends, as these may be employed to predict and prepare for future workforce planning issues.

## Objectives

The primary aim of this study was to investigate practice setting preferences of pharmacy students at Damascus University and evaluate factors that impact their choice decisions. A second purpose was to explore the students' attitudes toward two of the most popular practice settings in Syria, community pharmacy and medical marketing. Their attitudes toward clinical pharmacy as an emerging practice area were also sought.

## Materials and methods

This cross-sectional study was carried out on final-year (fifth-year) BPharm students enrolled in the school of

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