

Pharmacy technicians' attitudes about their roles in Iowa public safety

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Abstract

Objectives: To describe and apply a model for combining self-assessed frequency and criticality for pharmacy technicians' roles and to evaluate similarities and differences between attitudes toward public safety in various practice settings.

Design: Cross-sectional mail survey of randomly selected pharmacy technicians in one state.

Setting: Iowa in fall 2012.

Participants: 1,000 registered technicians.

Intervention: Mail survey with option for online completion.

Main outcome measures: Scored ratings related to perceptions of frequency and criticality of roles. Technicians rated role frequency on a scale from 1 (not responsible) to 6 (daily) and role criticality on a scale from 1 (no importance) to 4 (extremely important). A weighted relative importance score was ranked to show importance of the role considering frequency and criticality together.

Results: The response rate was 25.81%. Ratings for frequency were correlated to ratings for criticality for 22 of 23 roles. A Mann–Whitney *U* test found a difference between ambulatory technicians and hospital technicians. A visual matrix of a dual-scaled analysis showed both groups' role ratings to be positively linearly related. Hospital technicians showed wider discrimination in their ratings for some roles than for others.

Conclusion: Perceived role frequency and criticality can be considered together to contextualize the practice environment. The data suggest a relationship between perceived frequency of role performed and perception of a role's criticality. The study found differences between how technicians from various practice settings perceive their roles.

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As pharmacy technicians' roles evolve, it is important to understand technicians' attitudes about their roles in patient safety. Understanding attitudes provides context for enculturation of growing expectations and may assist in professional development to ensure competence and public safety.

Discussions surrounding technicians' expanding roles have been ongoing for decades. In 1975, Jeffery hypothesized the role of the pharmacy technician in 2000, writing, "Technicians will assume, almost completely, the mechanics of prescription filling. The pharmacist's role will be purely 'clinical' in this area."¹ Although technicians now have expanded roles, widespread and consistent practices remain elusive. This is attributable in part to differences in practice laws as well as organizational policy.

To provide evidence to support pharmacy technician role expansion, researchers have studied the use of the technician workforce in medication therapy management and improved quality of care.² For example, research has demonstrated that technicians have expanded their roles in medication reconciliation and in

assisting nurses with certain medication administration duties.^{3,4} Research has shown factors that predict the likelihood of technicians assuming unconventional roles are characteristics of practice settings, acceptance by pharmacists, and professional experience.⁵ A review of "tech-check-tech" programs reported that 12 states currently have a policy allowing for some aspect of this practice and that the published evidence on outcomes of such programs consistently support the accuracy and quality of properly implemented programs.⁶

It is important that the pharmacy profession supports pharmacy technicians in reaching their full potential, thereby allowing for pharmacists' reallocation in clinical activities.⁶ Part of this support should be a concerted effort to fully enculturate pharmacy technicians into professional practice. This effort could include fostering professional values toward high standards of excellence in work activities, as well as an attitude of obligation toward ensuring optimal patient outcomes. As efforts to instill and enhance elements of professionalism emerge, it will be important to understand technicians' current attitudes about and perceptions of their roles. Calls for attitude assessments when looking to expand technicians' roles have been previously discussed.⁷ Such assessments could assist managers in understanding feelings and biases toward work-related functions, promote pharmacy technicians' abilities, and help ensure a supported transition into expanded roles that are aligned with the goals of pharmacy practice.

To determine attitudes of pharmacy technicians, this study examined the organizational sociology element of work⁸ by measuring the congruency of technicians' perceptions of their roles. Understanding technicians' self-assessment of the roles they perform, as well as the perceived criticality of these roles, provides context for understanding professionalism in terms of attitudes of obligation in public safety and protection. To our knowledge, no literature has been published on techniques for measuring congruency between self-assessed perceptions of frequency and criticality of roles with respect to the pharmacy workforce in general and technicians in particular.

Objectives

The objectives of this study were to describe and apply a model for combining self-assessed frequency and self-assessed criticality for pharmacy technicians' roles and to evaluate similarities and differences between attitudes toward public safety in various practice settings.

Methods

As part of a longitudinal state-based technician research initiative that began in 2008, a task analysis rating assessment tool was added to a previously used technician survey in 2010 and 2012. The 2008 and subsequent surveys were derived from previous pharmacist work-

Key Points

Background:

- The pharmacy technician's role in contemporary pharmacy practice continues to receive considerable attention. However, state practice laws and organizational policies remain inconsistent in guiding potentially evolving roles.
- Supporting professional development of technicians relies on understanding currently held perceptions and attitudes. There is a gap in the literature on how technicians perceive their current roles.
- Conducting a task analysis is one way to gather data on perceptions of the practice environment. This study used a task analysis to measure technician-assessed perceptions and attitudes about roles they perform.

Findings:

- Perceived role frequency and criticality were useful in contextualizing the practice environment when conducting a task analysis.
- Roles that participating technicians perceived as critical in support of public safety in the practice environment were also the roles they self-assessed as performed most frequently.
- The specific practice setting for technicians may provide an important frame of reference for developing perceptions and attitudes about roles performed.

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