



Original Research

Perceptions of pharmacists' roles in the era of expanding scopes of practice

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Abstract

Background: Alberta was the first province in Canada to enact legislative changes to permit expansion of pharmacists' scope of practice, including allowing pharmacists to prescribe. However, such changes to the scope of practice can blur professional boundaries and obscure the roles of pharmacists. Understanding perceptions about the pharmacist's role may provide insight into recent and historical changes in pharmacy practice. This study clarifies perceptions held by pharmacists and other stakeholders concerning the role of the pharmacist in society.

Objective: To understand the perceptions of pharmacists, pharmacy students, technicians, other health care professionals, and the public of the pharmacist's role in Alberta.

Methods: A mixed methods approach was used: focus group sessions ($n = 9$) and individual interviews ($n = 4$) of pharmacists and other stakeholders were conducted and analyzed using qualitative-descriptive approach. A web-based survey of Alberta pharmacists ($n = 416$) explored pharmacists' perceptions of their own roles.

Results: Data analysis revealed the following: participants perceived that the pharmacist's role was transitioning to focus more on patient care; consistency in pharmacist uptake of this new role shaped the public's expectations; pharmacists with expanded scopes of practice were assuming greater responsibility; collaboration and relationships with other health care professionals were essential. The survey confirmed that changes in the roles of pharmacists were primarily related to patient care.

Conclusion: Following legislative changes and implementation of a compensation framework for pharmacy services, pharmacists and other stakeholders perceived the pharmacist's role to be shifting toward patient care. Periodic revisiting of pharmacists' roles and professional activities is needed to evaluate changes over time.

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Introduction

Over the past decade, a major shift in health care policy has emerged in Canadian and other health care systems worldwide. Escalating costs in health care and increasing rates of drug-related morbidity and mortality have resulted in re-evaluation of the scope and patterns of practice for health care providers, including pharmacists.¹ An expanded role for pharmacists for the purpose of improving patient care and drug therapy outcomes has been promoted by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Pharmaceutical Federation (FIP).²

Health care is under provincial jurisdiction in Canada, and most provinces have approved legislation over the past 10 years that supports a broader scope of pharmacist practice.^{3,4} More recently, pharmacy technicians have been recognized as regulated professionals.⁵ Alberta was the first province in Canada to legislate the expanded scope of pharmacy practice in 2007, including prescribing of medications (at initial access, for management of ongoing therapy, in emergencies) and adapting prescriptions. It was also the first province to authorize pharmacists to administer drugs by injection.^{6,7} Pharmacists can prescribe at initial access or for management of ongoing therapy (Additional Prescribing Authorization, APA) following completion of a peer-reviewed standardized application process. A comprehensive compensation framework for pharmacy services was introduced in Alberta in 2012.⁸ Innovative practice models have also emerged over the past several years in Alberta and across Canada. Integration of pharmacists into primary health care teams, pharmacists practicing in specialty clinics, and medication management services in community pharmacies are among these practice models.^{9,10} However, these changes may “blur” traditional professional boundaries and obscure the roles of pharmacists. Confusion surrounding pharmacists’ roles may affect how pharmacists understand and enact their roles and alter expectations of patients and other health care providers.

Research examining the perceptions of pharmacists and others of pharmacists’ roles in the era of expanded scopes of practice has been minimal. In 2009, researchers asked community pharmacists

in Alberta to describe their own professional roles; they found that participants described their roles most often in terms of medication distribution.¹¹ A qualitative study of pharmacists in England identified role ambiguity and lack of clear direction regarding the pharmacist’s contribution to patient care in contemporary pharmacy practice.¹² The purpose of this study is to understand how pharmacists, pharmacy students, other health care professionals, and the public perceive the pharmacist’s role in Alberta.

As pharmacists gain more experience with roles associated with expanded scopes of practice it is possible their views of pharmacists’ roles will evolve. The number of pharmacists in Alberta, Canada with authorizations to administer drugs by injections and prescribe medications (APA) has increased dramatically since the pharmacist prescribing model was implemented in 2007 and the compensation framework was introduced in 2012. At the end of December 2015, approximately 72% of pharmacists in Alberta were authorized to administer drugs by injection and 1166 pharmacists (22%) had APA designation (personal communications, Linda Hagen, January 8, 2016). This study of pharmacists’ roles will provide insight into how pharmacists view their roles, clarify pharmacy practice activities associated with those roles, and elucidate differences between pharmacists’ and other stakeholders’ perceptions.

Methods

Study design and participant recruitment

This research is part of a larger study designed to evaluate pharmacists’ roles and professional development needs to support expanded pharmacy practice. To investigate views on pharmacists’ roles, a mixed methods approach that included focus groups and individual interviews of pharmacists and other stakeholders was employed, and followed by a survey of Alberta pharmacists. We initially held focus group sessions and/or conducted interviews of pharmacists, pharmacy students, pharmacy technicians, pharmacy managers, physicians, allied health professionals, and the public. Focus groups were used to gather data on perceptions regarding pharmacists’ roles, the extent to which these roles have

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