Pharmacy technician’s role in an ambulatory care infusion clinic

Q: We are trying to develop broader roles for our pharmacy technicians so that they will be more satisfied with their careers and less likely to take a new job at a different institution. What examples of expanded responsibilities for technicians can you provide?

A: Harrison Memorial Hospital’s ambulatory care infusion clinic, located in Bremerton, Washington, has a successful blend of pharmacy and nursing personnel working side-by-side. The clinic is responsible for providing multiple services for the ambulatory care patient population, as well as managing the pharmacy portion of the hospital’s home health department and the area’s hospice agencies. At the heart of this program is the pharmacy technician.

In addition to the traditional duties of order entry, drug preparation, and inventory control, our technicians are involved in discharge planning and patient education and in direct patient care assistance. Technicians monitor laboratory test results, coordinate services with other departments, update patient demographic data, and program and maintain portable infusion devices. In addition, they are responsible for the clinic’s quality assurance reports.

The pharmacy technician is often the first member of the outpatient team who is notified of potential referrals and transfers to the ambulatory care clinic. Although ensuring a smooth transition from inpatient to outpatient status is a group effort, the clinic’s technicians play a key role in orchestrating the transfer of care.

Because of the ever-increasing workload of the pharmacist, it is up to the technician to collect accurate and complete information and to present it in such a way that the pharmacist can focus on the clinical aspects of a patient’s care. The technician reviews the patient’s chart, making sure that the ambulatory care clinic is the appropriate place for the patient. The technician must look beyond the medication order to identifying and eliminating potential barriers to care. Does the patient truly belong in ambulatory care? Is there a person at home who can help the patient get to appointments? What is the duration? Is the drug on the hospital’s formulary? If the physician writes an order for six weeks of an i.v. antibiotic, does the patient have a long-term i.v. catheter in place? Are there orders for other outpatient services that the ambulatory infusion clinic will need to coordinate with? Does the patient’s insurance cover outpatient services, and, if so, is prior authorization needed for treatment? Does the uninsured patient qualify for enrollment in the hospital’s medical indigent program? These are just a few of the issues our technicians regularly resolve before presenting the final patient profile to the pharmacist.

After the pharmacist has reviewed the prescription information, the technician enters the order into the pharmacy’s computer system. Medications are prepared and drug delivery devices are programmed and set up for the pharmacist to check. The technician determines which portable delivery device will be used on the basis of the drug’s stability and the patient’s needs. Additional teaching materials, support group information, and Internet resources may be requested to enhance the patient’s required counseling.

The technician may visit the patient and the family in the hospital. The technician describes the services available and gives the patient a general idea of what to expect during the first outpatient appointment. This is also an opportunity to provide some initial education about the equipment that will be used throughout treatment.

The technician coordinates referrals from outside the hospital. Although prohibited from taking telephoned medication
Management Consultation

orders, the technician can collect such information as the patient’s name, date of birth, insurance information, and diagnosis and when treatment is to begin. The referring party is asked to fax treatment orders, the patient’s most recent history and physical report, current laboratory test values, a list of current medications, and any other pertinent information. Upon receipt of this information, the reception desk and registration services are notified and the infusion suite is prepared.

The infusion clinic is also responsible for outpatient blood transfusions. The technician communicates with laboratory personnel, orders tests, and retrieves blood products from the blood bank. Transfusion patients are often in the department for extended periods and require additional attention. The technician supports the nursing staff by reporting any irregularities (such as infusion-pump alarms) or patient requests and by assisting the patient when possible.

Many ambulatory care patients require more than one type of service. The technician can arrange visits with other outpatient departments in the hospital. Some patients may eventually need home care or hospice support. Because our outpatient clinic manages the i.v., epidural, and intrathecal medications for the hospital’s home health agency and for area hospices, the pharmacy technician and other members of the outpatient team continue to be actively involved in the patient’s care, frequently communicating with the patient during his or her therapy.

No longer isolated in the pharmacy, technicians work closely with nurses in the ambulatory infusion clinic. This offers technicians a better understanding of and greater appreciation for a nurse’s duties. It also exposes technicians to new procedures or treatments they can assist the nurse in by acting as “another set of hands” or by obtaining supplies. The constant interaction among nurses, pharmacy technicians, and pharmacists creates a sense of camaraderie and shared goals.

Conducting the quality assurance duties of the clinic gives the technician a good understanding of patient outcomes and helps pharmacists deal with patients rather than paperwork. Technicians also share in the writing of new policies and procedures for the pharmacy component of the clinic.

The clinic’s technicians often represent the clinic at health fairs and other community programs. The technicians’ extensive knowledge of the clinic enables them to answer most of the general questions encountered, such as the services offered, how the portable infusion equipment works, insurance coverage, and how the clinic is staffed.

As the role of the pharmacist expands in our evolving health system, so too must the role of the pharmacy technician. Today’s technicians are active and contributing members of the health care team.

Dora Henderson, Pharmacy Technician
Shelly Johnson-Choong, Pharmacy Technician
Sarah Wiles, Pharmacy Technician

Optimum Infusion Services
Harrison Hospital
2520 Cherry Avenue, Room 332
Bremerton, WA 98310