The habits of successful pharmacists

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Graduating students, parents, family members and friends of the graduates, and faculty members: It is a pleasure to be with you today on this happy and historic occasion. To the graduating students, my heartfelt congratulations on achieving a significant milestone in your lives.

Steven Covey, one of the most widely followed life-management gurus of our time, advises us to begin with the end in mind. I believe in that advice, and I encourage you, the new graduates, to apply it to your career as a pharmacist. It may seem incongruous and distracting that, on this occasion for celebrating both a conclusion and a beginning, I am asking you to look ahead to the time, perhaps 40 years from now, when you may be retiring from active practice. But I can think of no better way to frame my message. When the time comes for you to look back on your career as a pharmacist, what is it that you hope to see and to feel?

I assume that you will want to feel fulfilled as a successful pharmacist. And what exactly does it mean to be a “successful pharmacist”?

It means happiness with life in your chosen profession. It means experiencing a sense of joy from professional practice that outweighs the problems that are always there. It means constantly thinking of ways to advance the profession. It means committing yourself to bringing about positive changes in pharmacy practice through whatever avenues are open to you. It means being an ambassador for the profession and speaking up about the good things pharmacists do.

There are few guarantees in life, but I have one for you: If you develop the right habits you will be a successful pharmacist. And what are the “right” habits? There are three that I will discuss briefly: (1) the habit of empathy, (2) the habit of translating complexity into simplicity, and (3) the habit of recognizing and acting on the obvious.

The habit of empathy. Successful pharmacists have empathy. Empathy with patients whose lives can be improved by the appropriate use of medicines. Empathy with patients whose health has been compromised by the inappropriate use of medicines.

“Throw your heart over the fence and the rest will follow.” That quotation from Norman Vincent Peale is an excellent message for new pharmacists. The reality is that pharmacy practice will not be a complete profession until all of its practitioners are driven by a deep and abiding desire to help people make the best use of medicines.

Empathy comes in part from a person’s basic orientation and in part from experience. I encourage you to seek training and early work experiences that boost empathy. Look for mentors who will steer you toward such experiences. If, in your early life as a pharmacist, you become truly engaged with patients and develop a deep sense of how this technology we call drugs affects lives, then you will have good grounding for career-long success. Success that will be linked to identifying in personal terms with both the healing and the harm that medicines can produce.

The habit of translating complexity into simplicity. Successful pharmacists also have learned how to translate complexity into simplicity. I’m talking here about clear thinking and the power of simple words. People judge our profession not only by how pharmacists act but also by what pharmacists say. Every time we speak with a nonpharmacist about our work, we have an opportunity to influence what someone thinks about the value of pharma-
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Most of the farmers in our township did the same. But the farmer next door, Mr. Stegner, never paid much attention to building maintenance. He was a wonderful person and an asset to the community, but he did not seem to notice when the roof of his barn began to leak and then sag. He did not seem to notice that the paint on his buildings was peeling. He did not seem to notice when the roof of his barn began to leak and then sag. He did not seem to notice that the paint on his buildings was peeling. Any stranger traveling through this community could not help but notice the distinctly different style of building maintenance by Farmer Stegner. From any typically normal perspective, there is no good defense of this management style. But to Mr. Stegner, who lived in the midst of this disrepair day in and day out, everything was normal.

I’m afraid that the Stegner school of farm management often applies to the practice of pharmacy. Much of what we accept as “normal” simply does not square with our proclamations about the pharmacist’s role or with an objective assessment of things pharmacists have under their control. And, unfortunately, because of the public’s stereotype of the pharmacist, strangers passing through our community do not even notice the disparity.

To illustrate this point, let’s think about two major drug products that were recently withdrawn from the market for safety reasons: troglitazone (Rezulin, Parke Davis) and cisapride (Propulsid, Janssen).

Troglitazone was removed from the market because of liver toxicity. Two million people used this treatment for type 2 diabetes mellitus. The drug’s potential for liver toxicity was well known, yet there were 90 cases of liver failure: 63 of these patients died, 20 patients survived but with serious liver damage, and 7 survived only after undergoing a liver transplant.

Listen to this sentence about troglitazone from a standard reference book on drugs: “Liver function tests should be performed at the start of therapy, monthly for the first eight months of therapy, every two months for the remainder of the first year of therapy, and periodically thereafter.” This is a very clear statement. Why was it not a standard of practice in our profession to ascertain definitely if a liver function test had been performed before the medication was dispensed? Is this not as simple as the pharmacist asking, “Has your doctor done a liver test and discussed the results with you?” No liver function test, no medication. Would that not have been a small price to pay to have avoided liver damage in 90 patients— to have saved the lives of 63 patients?

Consider next the case of cisapride, which is very effective at treating nighttime gastroesophageal reflux. Tens of millions of Americans have taken this medication. Before the manufacturer decided recently to restrict cisapride’s availability in the future, the drug was associated with 341 reports of heart rhythm abnormalities, including 80 deaths. A labeling change this past January said that patients should be given an electrocardiogram before beginning therapy. Previous warnings had been issued against prescribing the medication with drugs that might interact with it. Again, could not pharmacists have stepped up to this challenge and ensured that the appropriate monitoring test was done before the product was dispensed and that none of the potentially deadly interacting medications were being used by the patient? Would not the lives of 80 patients have been worth the effort?

This lack of assertive involvement by pharmacists is one of those situations generally considered normal in health care. But is it really normal for patients to be dying because pharmacists haven’t cared enough to ask the right questions or take the right steps? As you enter pharmacy practice, I challenge you to care enough. Care enough to know the latest safety information about medicines. Care enough to make pharmacy practice

cists. Thousands of such opportunities occur during a pharmacist’s lifetime, and each of us should prepare to perform well when given the chance. The pictures we create, the feelings we evoke with our words, have immense power.

A good technique for preparing for a discussion with a lay person is to imagine yourself on an airplane seat ed next to a chatty passenger. Eventually, the conversation gets around to your occupation. How do you answer that inevitable question, “And what do you do for a living?” Here is one possible answer:

I have one of the best jobs in the world. I devoted more than six years of my life to preparing for this career, although the learning has never really stopped. I work closely with doctors, nurses, and patients, and my job is to help them make the best use of medicines. Medicines have tremendous power to do good or to do harm. Achieving the good is my area of expertise. I am a pharmacist.

A general statement like this should be punctuated with examples of your success in helping patients improve their lives. Use examples that will relieve your fellow conversationalist of any old stereotypes of the pharmacist. Make this person want to tell others about the exciting work that is being done by pharmacists.

The habit of recognizing and acting on the obvious. Successful pharmacists also have learned to recognize and act on the obvious. When I think of this habit of successful pharmacists, I think about how easy it is to accept as “normal” the things that we see in our everyday lives that in fact are not normal and that could be improved with concentrated effort.

My mind takes me back to my boyhood, growing up on a family farm in Wisconsin. My parents were very proud of their farm and spent a lot of time maintaining the buildings and keeping them freshly painted. The pictures we create, the feelings we evoke with our words, have immense power.

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much more than just filling prescriptions. Show the world that pharmacists care.

**Conclusion.** There is an urgency for pharmacists to develop the habit of empathy, the habit of translating complexity into simplicity, and the habit of recognizing the obvious and acting on it.

This is so important because there are powerful forces afoot today that would have the public believe that the use of modern medicines is a simple matter of listening to a TV ad, asking a physician to prescribe the remedy, buying it at the cheapest price, and living happily ever after.

This is not the perspective of pharmacists. We know that medicines are powerful chemicals and that their use is filled with risk. We know that Madison Avenue is overly influential in determining the medicines physicians prescribe. We know that patient behavior is a big factor in achieving a medicine’s maximum benefit. We know that we must change what people expect of pharmacists and what pharmacists deliver when it comes to helping people make the best use of medicines.

The change in the role of the pharmacist that I am talking about will not “just happen.” It will take the leadership of successful pharmacists. You—every one of the new graduates in this audience—can be a successful pharmacist.

Robert Pirsig wrote a famous philosophical book in the 1970s called *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. I like what he had to say about challenges like the ones facing us in pharmacy:

I think that if we are going to reform the world, and make it a better place to live in, the way to do it is not with talk about relationships of a political nature... or with programs full of things for other people to do... The place to improve the world is first in one’s own heart and head and hands, and then work outward from there.

In other words, start by developing the right habits.

My best wishes to each of you on your journey toward developing the habits of a successful pharmacist, and in the great adventures awaiting you as you dedicate yourself to helping people make the best use of medicines.