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Critical Shortage of Pharmacists

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According to an Ipsos Reid study commissioned by the Canadian Association of Chain Drug Stores (CACDS), the current shortage for all Canadian retail pharmacies is about 2,000 to 3,500 as of spring 2001. According to the July 2001 edition of trade publication, *Drug Topics*, in the United States the shortage in the US has increased from 2,700 Full Time (FT) positions in 1998 to over 7,000 in 2000. Current 2001 estimates from the National Association of Chain Drug Stores in the US indicate there are over 12,000 positions available.

In British Columbia a Canadian Society of Hospital Pharmacists study shows that (as of November 30, 2000) 39 hospitals in BC reported pharmacist shortages. The province wide hospital pharmacy vacancy rate exceeded 10%. The BC College of Pharmacists set the current shortfall at over 150 full time pharmacists.

Reasons for the shortage

Many reasons are cited for the current pharmacist shortage in BC.

- The concentration of pharmacies in urban areas and opening of pharmacies in non-traditional locations such as department and grocery stores.
- In order to meet consumer demands, pharmacies are maintaining extended hours of operations including twenty-four hour locations as

- well as midnight locations. Pharmacies in the majority of cases are open seven days a week.
- The demographics of pharmacy students are changing and some are less inclined to move to remote locations due to family commitments.
- There are increased opportunities for pharmacists in industry, management and research that may lead to a decrease in the ranks of practicing pharmacists.
- The increased pressures of non-clinical administrative activities required to handle the complexity of third party plans and adjudication of prescriptions are limiting the clinic impact of pharmacists and overall job satisfaction.
- There is an increased demand on pharmacists to provide more patient counseling services/ activities to a “graying” population that requires more services.
- The pharmacist population is “graying” and, with increased competency assessment demands, more pharmacists are choosing to move from the active practice register to a non-practicing register.
- Attracted by very lucrative offers, a number of pharmacists seek employment in the United States. Estimates suggest that 15-20% of the University of British Columbia pharmacy graduates head to the US annually.

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position statement

- Hospital pharmacy shortages are increasing due to the higher wages being offered in community pharmacies.

The UBC Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences has faced enormous budget pressures due to a lack of funding. Tuition fees have been capped for many years resulting in the necessity to limit programs and delay expansion to meet the normal growth in the need for new pharmacists. Furthermore, building and space limitations are also hampering growth. With the exception of the dispensing lab, presently all other lectures and classes must be held in the buildings of other faculties. Pharmacy's center, the Cunningham building, has not changed since the early 70's when the class size was less than half of what it is today.

Impact of shortages

Although sometimes not apparent, the shortage of pharmacists is beginning to have a critical impact upon access to this essential and convenient aspect of our health care system.

- Pharmacies have closed as a direct result of the shortage of pharmacists. Initially these closures were noticed in remote rural areas but now include locations relatively close to major population areas.
- In many other cases pharmacies have been forced to reduce hours of operation and have required that employees work much longer hours and many days without a break.
- The shortage of pharmacists has increased demand for technicians, in turn requiring increased training programs and training facilities in that area as well.

- The demand for pharmacists has caused a significant escalation in wage rates attracting hospital pharmacists to leave their jobs for more lucrative positions in the community. Some hospitals are at risk of having to close their pharmacies as a result.

On-the-job pressures for pharmacists will continue to increase job-related stress and associated health problems.

BCPhA Position

- The Minister of Health Planning should establish a committee to recommend a program and implementation plan to help resolve the pharmacist shortage problem in British Columbia.
- Enrolment in the faculties of pharmacy across the country should be expanded by increasing the number of student seats.
- There must be an increase in the utilization of trained pharmacy technicians to complete the technical and non-clinical administrative activities related to the processing of prescriptions.
- New cost effective technology should be developed and introduced into pharmacies.
- The federal and provincial regulatory bodies should modify licensing requirements to encourage soon-to-be retired pharmacists to remain in the profession.
- The UBC Faculty of Pharmacy should be encouraged to develop and implement their proposal for a "fast track" pharmacy degree program for applicants who have already completed a qualifying science degree.