

Medical Communications/Drug Information

Background

Pharmacists who specialize in medical communications/drug information provide educational services about pharmaceutical products for health care professionals, pharmaceutical industry personnel, and consumers. They may be employed by medical communications firms, pharmaceutical manufacturers, academic institutions, managed care organizations, hospitals, professional associations, clinical research organizations, or other health care settings. Their responsibilities vary by the type of setting in which they practice.

Their efforts may be internally focused, for example providing services to employees of a pharmaceutical manufacturer or as an in-house library and information service. Or their clientele may be the general public, for example providing information in a poison control center in response to queries from physicians, nurses, other pharmacists, or the general community. Perhaps more frequently, these pharmacists are manufacturers' employees with the responsibility for providing authoritative information on their company's products to pharmacists or physicians with specific information needs regarding a particular product (e.g., special dosage needs, unusual reactions). Additionally, many pharmacists are employed by medical communications companies or professional associations that publish authoritative drug information references.

Medical communications/drug information pharmacists have diverse responsibilities in the health care system. According to the survey, 26% of their time is spent on the "other" category. This likely includes the literature searching and writing that they do. Nineteen percent is spent on data management, followed by 12% on patient management services, 10% on teaching, and the remainder divided across a variety of other functions.

Characteristics

Fifteen pharmacists responded to the 2012 *APhA Career Pathway Evaluation Program* survey. Among the respondents, 63% had earned a PharmD degree. Fifty-four percent had an advanced degree (MA, MS, MBA, PhD, or other degree). Many have undertaken educational or training programs beyond their earned pharmacy degree. Twenty-six percent had completed a residency, 35% had earned a certificate, and 9% had taken other training.

The mean age was 43 years old and about two thirds (64%) were female. Almost two thirds (64%) identify themselves as being in management. Income data from this survey show that 22% of these pharmacists report that they earn between \$80,000–100,000 annually. Thirty-three percent earn \$110,000 - \$130,000 and 44% earn \$140,000 or more. Medical communications/drug information pharmacists work an average of 42.5 hours per week.

Sixty-seven percent report that they were "extremely satisfied" with their work, with the remaining 33% indicating they were "somewhat satisfied." The exact same proportion of responses were seen regarding how challenging the work is with 67% reported being "extremely challenged" with their work and the remaining 33% reported "somewhat

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challenged.” None were dissatisfied or unchallenged in their practice settings, which is similar to the survey conducted in 2007 of these pharmacists.

Insider’s Perspective

What aspects of the job are most appealing?

Medical communications/drug information pharmacists really seem to enjoy the work that they do. Many respondents said that their work is highly rewarding and has an optimal work schedule. One said, “I find the fact that through my work in medical informatics/drug information I help keep millions of patients safe from medication errors the most satisfying aspect of my job. There is excellent work/life balance - we keep Monday through Friday business hours.”

Similarly, another respondent said they enjoyed “The ability to work independently, research new topics from multiple angles, and create my own schedule.”

What aspects of the job are least appealing?

Some found that the solitary nature of these positions were less appealing. One respondent said that the least appealing aspect of their job is the “lack of colleagues to... bounce ideas off of.” Another liked their position so much that they answered this question by saying, “I can't think of any aspects of my current work that are not appealing. I wish it had not taken 20 years of my career to find this amazing opportunity.”

What advice should students and practitioners consider when selecting the option of medical communications/drug information pharmacy?

Several respondents advised that pharmacy experience is helpful before working in this field. One respondent said, “I would recommend gaining clinical and practical experience prior to joining the pharmaceutical industry, a lot more doors will be available to open.” Another echoed this sentiment saying, “My success in my current work setting hinges on years of experience in many aspects of pharmacy practice (retail - independent and chain practice sites, hospital, clinical specialist, academia and long-term care). Try many opportunities and gain as much experience as possible in order to be prepared for the most appealing position.”

Other respondents advised “time management skills are critical; have to cope with meeting deadlines” and “have multiple resources of information at your fingertips.”

Critical Factor Ratings

Interaction with Patients

Consistent with the environment of medical communications practices, the low range 3.6 rating identifies interaction with patients and other members of the public as occupying only a small portion of medical communications/drug information pharmacists' work time. For the most part, these pharmacists do not interact with patients except for limited times on the telephone.

= 3.6



Conducting Physical Assessments

Not surprisingly, the low range rating of 1.1 underscores that respondents do not conduct physical assessments. This was the lowest-rated factor in this profile. This makes sense given the indirect role they play in patient care.

= 1.1



Interpreting Laboratory Values

Another low rating of 2.2 indicates that medical communications/drug information pharmacists spend relatively little of their time interpreting laboratory values.

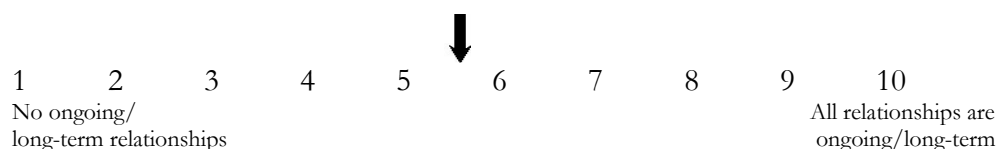
= 2.2



Continuity of Relationships

Because of the nature of the role that medical communications pharmacists take, there is little continuity of relationships with patients in the field. These pharmacists are engaged in episodic contacts, the vast majority of which are short-term relationships. However, some longer-standing relationships can develop with other health care professionals who rely on their expertise.

= 5.6



Helping People

Another low range rating of 3.1 indicates that the help and services these respondents provide in their practices are almost exclusively indirect, rather than directly helping

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individuals. The exception to this rule is when the medical communications department is housed in a tertiary care institution where other practitioners have easy access to come in and request information.

= 3.1



Collaboration with Other Professionals

Medical communications/drug information pharmacists engage in collaboration with other professionals on a regular basis. This may well be a function of the specific position and the type of organization employing the pharmacist.

= 6.8



Educating Other Professionals

Medical communications/drug information pharmacists rated this factor mid-range at 6.7, indicating that they spend time educating health professionals other than pharmacists.

= 6.7



Variety of Daily Activities

To a high degree, these specialists experience a wide variety of activities and issues in their daily responsibilities reflected by the 7.9 rating.

= 7.9



Multiple Task Handling

Medical communications/drug information pharmacists experience the need for multitasking as indicated by the 7.5 rating for this factor. Their work is inherently involved in the accomplishment of a myriad of duties from telephone calls to writing and editing—all at the same time.

= 7.5

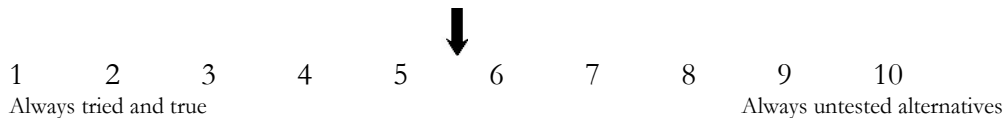


Problem Solving

On the mid-range of the scale at 5.6, these respondents are slightly more involved in seeking solutions to problems by untested means, rather than being able to rely on previously used

alternatives. This rating may be in response to an unusual dosage form need or a drug reaction experienced by a patient.

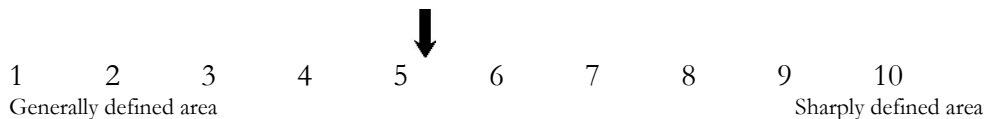
= 5.6



Focus of Expertise

Medical communications/drug information pharmacists equally use a sharply defined area of expertise along with general expertise in carrying out their responsibilities. This rating is consistent with the data that few have advanced degrees, yet most have achieved other forms of advanced training.

= 5.2



Innovative Thinking

Medical communications/drug information pharmacists tend to be involved in innovative thinking as a part of their practice. This is consistent with their responses regarding problem solving and their continuing need to apply solid scientific knowledge to both constantly changing and new questions or problems.

= 7.7



Applying Scientific Knowledge

The application of scientific knowledge is critical for medical communications/drug information pharmacy and this response confirms it. Pharmacists in this field apply such information all the time.

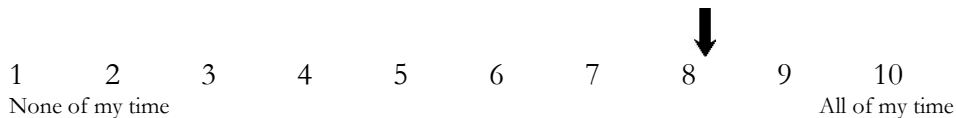
= 7.6



Applying Medical Knowledge

Respondents indicated that medical knowledge is very important for the work of medical communications/drug information pharmacists.

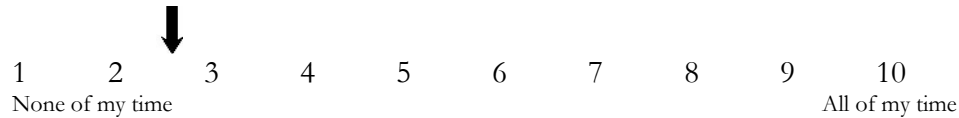
= 8.2



Creating New Knowledge by Conducting Research

Despite their concentration on research to obtain accurate information regarding a drug product or preparation, these pharmacists do not perceive themselves as generating “new” information through research. Consequently, a 2.6 rating is on the lower end of the spectrum, identifying the creation of new knowledge as consuming a smaller portion of their practice time.

= 2.6



Management/Supervision of Others

Respondents find themselves in the lower mid-range with regard to the time they spend managing and supervising others.

= 4.3



Management/Supervision of a Business

Respondents indicated that they spend slightly less time on the management of the business compared with managing others.

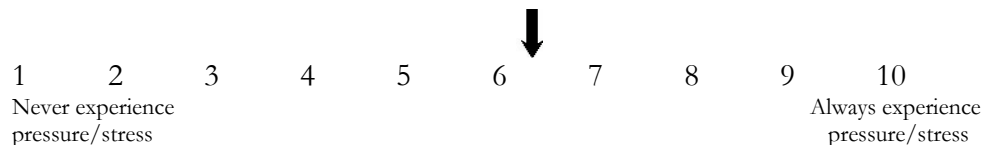
= 3.2



Pressure/Stress

As with many types of pharmacy practitioners, there is a moderate stress level within the medical communications/drug information environment. In this case, the pressure may be coming from other professionals, rather than from the patient or the public.

= 6.3



Work Schedule

A higher mid-range range 6.8 rating identifies a regular and predictable work schedule for these pharmacists. This is not surprising, given the “office” nature of the work (i.e., Monday–Friday) and generally large corporate employers.

= 6.8



Part-Time Opportunities

Part-time opportunities exist in this field to a moderate level.

= 4.6



Job-Sharing Opportunities

Because of the nature of the activities performed by medical communications pharmacists, job-sharing opportunities are limited.

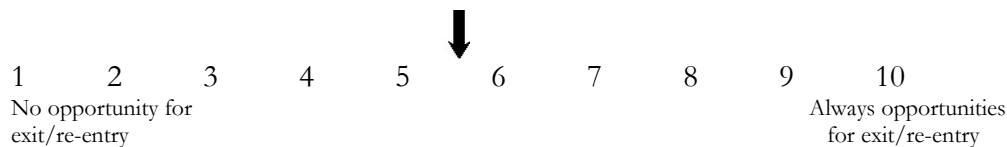
= 3.6



Exit/Re-entry Opportunities

Exit/re-entry opportunities are mid-range for this group with a rating of 5.6, indicating that there are opportunities if someone exits the field and wants to regain employment.

= 5.6



Parental Leave Opportunities

Medical communications pharmacists rated parental leave the highest across all profiles in this survey. In addition, this factor is tied for the highest rating internally for this group.

= 7.6



Leisure/Family Time

To a considerable degree, these pharmacists enjoy ample opportunity for personal and family time. This is made possible by the reliability and regularity of their work schedule and the very nature of the work.

= 8.1



Job Security

Consistent with related responses regarding work schedule and availability of free time, medical communications/drug information pharmacists enjoy a high range level of job security. They are generally employed by larger institutions and corporations in which employment is stable by nature.

= 7.4



Opportunities for Advancement

Depending on the size of their employer and the department they work in, different opportunities for advancement exist for medical communications/drug information pharmacists. With a 6.8 rating, these pharmacists indicate having the chance to move ahead in their chosen careers.

= 6.8



Opportunities for Leadership Development

Opportunities to develop leadership skills are widely available to these pharmacists within their employment.

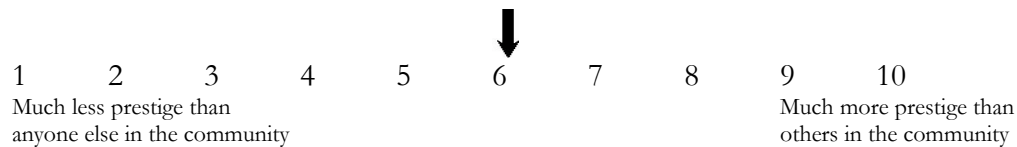
= 7.1



Community Prestige

Medical communications/drug information pharmacists indicated that they are mid-range regarding prestige within the community. This also may be specific to the environment because in some settings where they interact with the public (e.g., a poison control center), pharmacists are held in very high esteem by patients and others.

=6.1



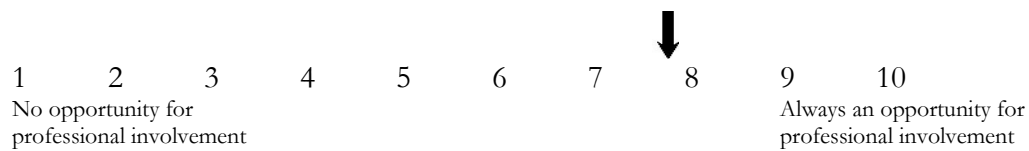
Professional Involvement

A high range rating of 7.7 is evidence that medical communications/drug information pharmacists have the opportunity to participate in meetings and other events within the pharmacy profession. The very nature of their work involves knowledge of and acceptance by other practitioners and professionals, so it is advantageous for these pharmacists to know others within the profession and to be known by them as reliable information sources.

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= 7.7

**Income**

These pharmacists indicated that they are properly compensated for their work within the medical communications/drug information practice setting.

= 8.4

**Benefits (vacation, health, retirement)**

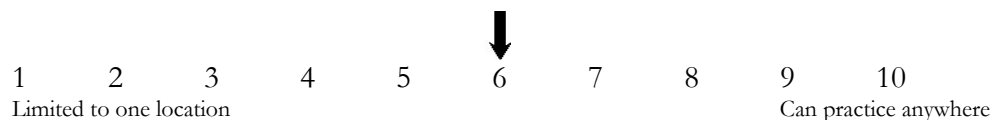
Directly related to responses for income level are the matter of benefits. This rating acknowledges that benefits such as vacation, health insurance, and retirement packages are available to medical communications/drug information pharmacists. Employment by larger corporate entities also are a positive factor in this regard.

= 8.2

**Geographic Location**

With an 6.0 rating, pharmacists report that they have moderate opportunities to relocate. If affiliated with academic institutions or hospitals, relocation is widely available. With the pharmaceutical industry, however, corporate entities are concentrated in California, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, North Carolina, Indiana, Illinois, and other geographic regions thereby limiting relocation choices.

= 6.0

**Working Remotely**

With a score of 7.6, much of the work of medical communications/drug information pharmacists can be done from a remote location. This makes sense considering the work that they do is mostly done independently and could be completed using a laptop or home computer.

= 7.6



Advanced Degree

A graduate degree is sometimes needed for medical communications/drug information pharmacy.

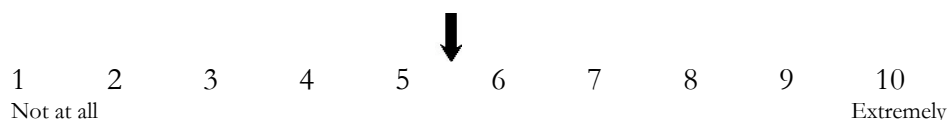
= 5.2



Entrepreneurial Opportunity

With a mid-range rating, medical communications/drug information pharmacists believe that there are limited opportunities for entrepreneurs within the field. Interestingly, there are a few respondents who work from home offices and look at themselves as entrepreneurial. Some practice settings may allow for more entrepreneurship and creativity (e.g., developing a new drug information resource).

= 5.5



Additional Training

A rating of 6.3 shows that getting additional training is helpful but not always required.

= 6.3



Interacting With Colleagues

Considering the work that these pharmacists do, it is not surprising that they interact with colleagues often.

= 8.3



Travel

Travel is not a specific requirement for the day-to-day roles of respondents. Nonetheless, there could be opportunity to travel depending on the position that the pharmacist holds.

= 2.1



Writing

Respondents were high range in the amount of writing that they do. The writing of reports and the necessity for logging information enters into the picture for many of these

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pharmacists.

= 6.8



Working With Teams

Respondents work both as individuals and with teams. The team approach is related to larger projects and complex questions that are asked of the group.

= 7.2



Mean Scores for Critical Factors

1. Interaction with people	3.6
2. Performing physical assessments	1.1
3. Interpreting laboratory values	2.2
4. Continuity of relationships	5.6
5. Extent to which effect is direct	3.1
6. Collaboration with other professionals	6.8
7. Educating other professionals	6.7
8. Variety of daily activities	7.9
9. Multiple task handling	7.5
10. Problem solving	5.6
11. Focus of expertise	5.2
12. Innovative thinking	7.7
13. Applying scientific knowledge	7.6
14. Applying medical knowledge	8.2
15. Creating new knowledge by conducting research	2.6
16. Managing others	4.3
17. Managing business operations	3.2
18. Pressure/Stress	6.3
19. Work schedule	6.8
20. Part time opportunities	4.6
21. Job sharing	3.6
22. Exit and re-entry	5.6
23. Parental leave	7.6
24. Free time for leisure/family activities	8.1
25. Job security	7.4
26. Opportunities for advancement	6.8
27. Opportunities for leadership development	7.1
28. Community prestige	6.1
29. Professional involvement	7.7
30. Income	8.4
31. Benefits (vacation, health, retirement)	8.2
32. Geographic location	6.0

33. Working Remotely	7.6
34. Autonomy	8.3
35. Self-Worth	8.9
36. Future focus	7.8
37. Professional prestige	7.2
38. Unique practice environment	9.2
39. Advanced degree	5.2
40. Entrepreneurial opportunity	5.5
41. Additional training	6.3
42. Interacting with co-workers	8.3
43. Travel	2.1
44. Writing	6.8
45. Working with teams	7.2

Reference

Schommer JC. *APhACareer Pathway Evaluation Program for Pharmacy Professionals 2012 Pharmacist Profile Survey*. February 2013.

Professional Organizations

American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACCP)
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