

Specialty Pharmacy

Holland Code: IEC

Background

The definition of specialty pharmaceuticals and specialty pharmacy continue to change as the field begins to segment itself from traditional pharmacy. Many pharmacy organizations — including the American Pharmacists Association (APhA), the Association of Managed Care Pharmacy (AMCP), the National Association of Chain Drug Stores (NACDS), and the Specialty Pharmacy Association of America (SPAARx)—have provided definitions of specialty pharmacy.

For this background section, information is provided from the NACDS document titled *Specialty Pharmacy in Community Pharmacy: The Time Is Now—and How!* The basic premise is that a specialty pharmacy dispenses medications (injectable, intravenous, or oral) in certain chronic and life-threatening disease states. Specific clinical monitoring is required for some of the medications. Many of the medications also have a high cost associated with their use and may have adverse event profiles that are more complex than other medications. As noted by NACDS:

Specialty pharmacy is defined as the service created to manage the handling and service requirements of specialty pharmaceuticals, including dispensing, distribution, reimbursement, case management, and other services specific to patients with rare and/or chronic diseases.

The focus on appropriate drug utilization in conjunction with the ongoing monitoring of patient care is an essential element of the specialty pharmacy field. Examples of the types of diseases addressed within the scope of specialty pharmacy services include:

- Cancer
- Crohn's disease
- Gaucher's disease
- Growth hormone deficiency
- Hemophilia
- Hepatitis C
- HIV/AIDS
- Immune disorders
- Infertility
- Multiple sclerosis
- Pulmonary hypertension
- Rheumatoid arthritis

Characteristics

Twenty-seven pharmacists in specialty pharmacy responded to the 2012 *APhA Career Pathway Evaluation Program* survey. Thirty-five percent of respondents held an entry-level pharmacy degree; 65% held the PharmD degree. Thirty percent indicated they held an advanced degree (MA, MS, MBS, PhD, or other). Thirty percent had been through a residency program, 30% had been through a certificate training program, and

5% reported having been through some form of other training. Respondents' average age was 46 years old. Forty percent of respondents were female. Income data show 13% earn between \$80,000–\$100,000, while 51% earn \$100,000 or more per year, with 13% earning greater than \$150,000. The average time worked per week was 41 hours.

An overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that they were satisfied with their role, with 61% indicating “extremely satisfied” and 31% indicating “somewhat satisfied.” Similarly, most respondents indicated that they felt the job was challenging, with 54% indicating “extremely challenging” and 42% indicating “somewhat challenging.”

Insider’s Perspective

What aspects of the job are most appealing?

Specialty pharmacy is a growing field and the practice environment itself is changing. One of the most appealing aspects of these roles, cited by 24% of pharmacists, was their work schedule. This was followed by 12% who indicated that the benefits provided to them also are a very appealing aspect of the work. Respondents indicated that they spend 32% of their time on patient care services including counseling when dispensing a medication. Additional comments included the appealing aspect of working with a team of professionals and the challenges of clinical practice in the specialty area. One respondent summed up many of the thoughts expressed when stating that the role was appealing because of “work with other pharmacists and nurses, and have the ability to work from home when needed—have a flexible schedule. The benefits package is tremendous.”

What aspects of the job are least appealing?

Specialty pharmacists listed three areas equally as least appealing aspects of the role in an open-ended section of the survey. Travel, volume of prescriptions processed, and low patient interaction were cited by 12% of pharmacist as least appealing aspects of their roles. An important distinction to make is the different roles that pharmacists have in the specialty area. Some roles are more dispensing based while others are more patient-centered information based. One respondent indicated that “some travel is involved, which leads to lots of communication issues.” Another just used one word to describe the least appealing aspect of the work—“travel.”

What advice should students and practitioners consider when selecting the option of specialty pharmacy?

One practitioner noted that students should “try to work in a specialty pharmacy, ask a lot of questions, and observe the clinical and financial aspects of the practice.” Another added, “If students are able to think creatively and have the patience to address and resolve issues, specialty pharmacy will employ many of these skills including many they will learn that are not taught in pharmacy school.

Adapted from the American Pharmacists Association