Specialty Pharmacy

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.

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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.”
Critical Factor Ratings

Interaction With Patients
Specialty pharmacists’ responses varied on this critical factor as some indicated that they have little time for interaction with patients while others indicated that they had a great deal of time interacting with patients. Rating this factor may be based on the type of specialty practice where they are employed. Those in a specialty pharmacy that provides only mail order services may have less time than those in other settings for patient interaction.  

= 4.9

Conducting Physical Assessments
This group rated conducting physical assessments as the lowest critical factor. Specialty pharmacists rarely if ever conduct physical assessments.  

= 1.3

Interpreting Laboratory Values
Interpreting laboratory values also was one of the lowest-rated critical factors. There is little opportunity for specialty pharmacists to get access to laboratory values at this time.  

= 2.7

Continuity of Relationships
Specialty pharmacists are almost exactly mid-range at 5.6 with regard to continuity of relationships. However, those in specific disease state areas have greater opportunities to have long-term relationships with patients.  

= 5.6

Helping People
At a 5.5 rating, specialty pharmacists are at the mid-point with regard to direct or indirect patient contact.  

= 5.5
Collaboration With Other Professionals
Specialty pharmacists lean more toward collaboration with other professionals. One respondent put it this way, “I have meetings with other providers and patients helping them be successful with their medications.”

= 6.4

Educating Other Professionals
While specialty pharmacists are in the low mid-range at 4.6 for educating other professionals, one respondent indicated educating others by noting they “precept fourth-year pharmacy students on rotation.”

= 4.6

Variety of Daily Activities
Specialty pharmacists are mid-range in the variety of activities they perform. Some roles and tasks are repetitive.

= 5.6

Multiple Task Handling
One of the five top-rated critical factors, specialty pharmacists indicated that they multitask, often handling multiple functions at a time.

= 7.8

Problem Solving
While pharmacists in this group considered themselves mid-range for problem solving, the opportunities exist for assisting patients with complex medications. One respondent stated, “specific task is to develop an electronic medical record of oncology protocols as a template to create a treatment plan for our patient population.”

= 5.1
Focus of Expertise
As specialty pharmacy continues to expand, pharmacists in the field are shifting toward a more sharply defined area of expertise. This focus of expertise is especially true in those specialty pharmacies that have disease management programs.

= 6.7

Innovative Thinking
Respondents were mid-range in how often the work they perform includes innovative thinking.

= 6.5

Applying Scientific Knowledge
Specialty pharmacists are mid-range with regard to the application of scientific knowledge. As many of these pharmacists are experts in a given disease state, some mentioned that this might decrease how they interpret the application of the knowledge they have.

= 5.7

Applying Medical Knowledge
Similar to the application of scientific knowledge, the application of medical knowledge is mid-range at 5.8.

= 5.8

Creating New Knowledge by Conducting Research
While specialty pharmacists indicated that the opportunities for research and creating new knowledge is limited, one respondent stated, “I learn something new on a daily basis.”

= 3.1
Management/Supervision of Others
Specialty pharmacists tend to oversee other pharmacy staff personnel. However, respondents indicated that they spend only 5% of their time on personnel management. 

= 4.7

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
None of my time All of my time

Management/Supervision of a Business
The respondents indicated that they spend little time on business management. They indicated spending 11% of their time on these functions.

= 4.3

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
None of my time All of my time

Pressure/Stress
Specialty pharmacists are mid-range at 5.7 regarding the amount of pressure and stress that they face.

= 5.7

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Never experience pressure/stress Always experience pressure/stress

Work Schedule
As noted earlier, 24% of the specialty pharmacists indicated that this is one of the most appealing aspects of the role. Respondents summed it up by stating that the most appealing aspects of the role were the “schedule and work environment” and the “hours and the pace of work.”

= 5.9

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Irregular/unpredictable Regular/predictable

Part-Time Opportunities
Specialty pharmacy offers some part-time opportunities for pharmacists. While these may not provide the hours some desire, there are opportunities for different shifts.

= 4.6

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
No opportunity for part-time employment Always opportunities for part-time employment
Job-Sharing Opportunities
There is little opportunity for job sharing in the field. This factor may be more tied to the specialized needs of the pharmacists and case management.

= 3.6

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
No opportunity for job-sharing

Exit/Re-entry Opportunities
The possibility to leave the area of specialty and then re-enter rated a 5.3 mid-range for the group.

= 5.3

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
No opportunity for exit/re-entry

Parental Leave Opportunities
As part of the benefits that were rated high by these pharmacists, parental leave opportunities do exist.

= 6.0

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
No opportunity for parental leave

Leisure/Family Time
Specialty pharmacists indicated that they were mid-range at 6.0 relative to having free time for leisure/family time.

= 6.0

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
No free time

Job Security
Job security trended slightly more toward the security side based on the respondents’ ratings.

= 6.4

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
No security/stability

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Opportunities for Advancement
Specialty pharmacists indicated that they have some opportunities for advancement. This factor is also dependent on the type of environment where they work. = 5.1

Opportunities for Leadership Development
Opportunities exist for leadership development. Some respondents indicated that this relates well to interdisciplinary team leadership. = 6.1

Community Prestige
Specialty pharmacists indicated that they are in the upper mid-range with regard to community prestige. One respondent provided a good example of this by stating, “We are a non-profit pharmacy providing medications at no charge to the patient after the patient has qualified for our services”—a great community service. = 6.7

Professional Involvement
The opportunity for professional involvement is similar to most other profiles. This factor is dependent on the individual pharmacist’s motivation and desire to become professionally involved. = 6.1

Income
Specialty pharmacists indicated that they are in the upper mid-range regarding compensation. = 6.9
Benefits (vacation, health, retirement)
Benefits rated as one of the top five critical factors for specialty pharmacists. Employers’ benefit packages are an appealing aspect for this group. One respondent stated, “Benefits are just as important as pay rate if not more.”

= 7.1

Geographic Location
Respondents were exactly mid-range at 5.5 with regard to work location.

= 5.5

Working Remotely
Specialty pharmacists indicated that there are limited opportunities to work remotely. This factor varies by the environment in which the pharmacist is employed. However, one respondent reported “have the ability to work from home when needed and have a flexible schedule.”

= 3.5

Autonomy
Specialty pharmacists indicated a level of autonomy in their work. This was described well by a respondent who reported providing “one-to-one interviews and instruction to patients, as well as running teaching groups for patient questions.” Another respondent indicated “have a sense of control over how to complete tasks.”

= 6.6

Self-Worth
Self-worth is one of the five top-rated critical factors for specialty pharmacists. This rating was summed up by a respondent who stated, “Working in a small psychiatric acute care hospital with a very stable dedicated administrative staff has formed a work force that cares about each other, as well as patients, so everyone feels satisfied and interesting and important.”

= 7.7
Future Focus
Specialty pharmacists indicated that they tend to have a slight focus on the future. This factor is well situated considering the pipeline of many companies that will be bringing specialty medications to the market.

= 6.6

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Focus on immediate task               Focus on future

Professional Prestige
Professional prestige was rated slightly lower than community prestige. This rating may be based on the lack of a definitive definition of specialty pharmacy.

= 5.6

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Never provided                                Always provided

Unique Practice Environment
Rated as the highest critical factor for specialty pharmacists, these pharmacists work in a very unique practice environment. One respondent indicated this unique practice environment provides opportunities for “clinical pharmacists to work on a team of individuals who bring their expertise to provide the best product to the patient,” which is something unique to specialty pharmacy.

= 8.7

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Not at all unique                             Extremely unique

Advanced Degree
While the respondents indicated that they are mid-range regarding the need for an advanced degree, 30% held an advanced degree (MA, MS, MBS, PhD, or other).

= 4.8

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Advanced degree not required      Advanced degree required

Entrepreneurial Opportunity
There are some entrepreneurial opportunities in specialty pharmacy. One respondent was excited about the opportunity to “start a new specialty pharmacy for a chain.”

= 4.6

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Not at all                              Extremely
Additional Training
While the respondents indicated that they are mid-range regarding the requirement for additional training, 30% have had some type of certificate or other training. = 6.9

Interacting With Colleagues
Interacting with colleagues was one of the top five critical factors for specialty pharmacists. They interact with colleagues regarding clinical care and establishing clinical protocols. One respondent stated “work with other pharmacists and nurses. My employer values its health care professionals.” = 7.7

Travel
Specialty pharmacists have limited travel opportunities based on the work they provide. Travel was rated as one of the lowest critical factors for this group. = 2.7

Writing
Writing opportunities are limited for the specialty pharmacist. However, opportunities do exist as new programs are developed and articles are written to provide insights for others. = 3.4

Working With Teams
Specialty pharmacists were mid-range in the time they spend working in teams. = 5.7
### Mean Scores for Critical Factors

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References


Professional Organizations
American Pharmacists Association (APhA)
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