

# FOCUS: TECHNICIANS



*L&S Pharmacy technician Megan Cross checks on a prescription.*

# The technician's role as a community health worker

by Chris Linville

Like any community pharmacist, Tripp Logan, PharmD, knows that pharmacy technicians are vital to a pharmacy's success.

Logan, vice president of Logan & Seiler Inc., which consists of L&S Pharmacy in Charleston, Mo., and Medical Arts Pharmacy in nearby Sikeston, Mo., says the problem, if you want to describe it that way, is that technicians need better marketing.

"I don't think what we do is an anomaly — I've got colleagues around the country who are also empowering their technicians to take more ownership of their roles and responsibilities," Logan says. "It's just that we don't do a very good job of telling anyone other than ourselves and our communities. They know, but others don't get it."

How to change that? The answer might be training technicians to be community health workers. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines community health workers as liaisons with resources in the communities they serve. They play a vital role in improving health by providing a connection between health systems and community resources,

as well as education on how to reduce behavioral health risk factors.

"It's more about looking at a patient as a person, talking to them as a peer, and then determining what their needs are," Logan says. "It's all about needs assessment — care coordination, medication, social, or whatever that need is. It's beyond just looking at the prescription drug side."

In other words, it's what many technicians are already doing. Logan says he went to a CPESN® USA meet-

ing in North Carolina last year and met a couple of community health workers. The services they said they could provide struck a chord. "It immediately resonated with me," he says. The pharmacy currently has a grant from the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services and the CDC to assess how community health workers could be integrated into a community pharmacy.

"Our goal is to prove that technicians as community health workers can serve that care coordination piece,

## How community health workers can help

- **Individual support:** Provide encouragement and social support to assist individuals with goal setting and barrier identification within professional boundaries.
- **Care coordination:** Assist in coordinating care by linking people to appropriate information and services.
- **Health care liaison** Serve as a culturally-informed liaison between individuals and community health care systems.
- **Health education:** Provide culturally appropriate health education to individuals, organizations and/or communities, in an effort to reduce modifiable risk factors and encourage healthy behaviors.
- **Advocacy:** Recognize gaps and advocate for individual and community health needs.

and get away from remote care, and telephonic care, and all the things that we know in this rural community don't work with the most at-risk and needy patients," Logan says.

And Logan acknowledges that the CHW designation does seem to carry some clout. When he speaks to health care providers, primary care physicians, nurse practitioners, health systems CEOs, and insurers about what his technicians do, they sort of nod their heads. "But when we say to them that we have community health care workers, they get all excited," he says. "I want to say, 'It's the same freaking

people!' Call it semantics, call it a different title, call it whatever, but it's meaningful when you say 'community health worker!'"

#### **ALREADY DOING THE JOB**

Certified pharmacy technician Michelle Pattengill has been with L&S Pharmacy for 13 years. She describes herself as a "jack-of-all-trades. Whatever they need, I'll do it."

Through her years of experience, Pattengill has managed to get a handle on the byzantine world of health care insurance, in particular Medicare Part D. Patients have come

to depend on her expertise to help make some sense of a confusing system. Having grown up in the area, she has a bond with many of the patients, so she goes the extra mile to provide answers.

For example, earlier this year she was seeking to help a couple with unusually high co-pays. Pattengill made a lot of phone calls and did some detective work, suspecting a mistake by a federal agency. The good news was that within 24 hours the monthly co-pays were down from \$1,100 to \$400 combined for the couple.



"The gentleman hugged me so tightly that I thought he was going to squeeze the life out of me," she says. "That's gratification right there. He said, 'Thank you Michelle, I was going to have to sell my truck.' That's what it's all about, in a nutshell."

Logan says that Pattengill's problem-solving abilities and people skills made her an ideal candidate for community health worker training. Early this year she began attending a three-hour night class once a week at Southeast Missouri State University. When the class is complete in the spring, she'll receive a certificate. For Pattengill, much of the course covers familiar ground, but it provides some clarity.

"There's terminology that I've heard, that I've seen in emails, and now I'm understanding what it means," she says. "It's everything that we are already doing, but now everything we do has a name. There's a process to what we're doing that I wasn't aware of before."

Logan says, "Michelle doesn't need that certificate to do community health work. But she has to have that certificate so that others who work with us know what she does."

***L&S Pharmacy technician Michelle Pattengill says it's important to go the extra mile to get answers for patients.***



***Cross says her focus as a community health worker is to help give patients confidence in managing their health, while providing guidance if needed.***

#### **LENDING SUPPORT**

As Pattengill was working toward her community health worker certificate, Megan Cross, a fellow L&S pharmacy technician, was the first on staff to complete the program, earning her certificate at State Fair Community College. She has been with L&S for about year, so in contrast to Pattengill, she's still learning the ropes. But Cross is eager to use her CHW training to help provide an additional layer of service and fill any gaps.

"I'm looking at how we can help them beyond just the medications," she says. "We do deliveries to several different towns within our community. If somebody hasn't been feeling very well, we know that because our delivery driver saw that person. We try to see if there is anything we can do to help. I can't tell you how many times we have called to check

on someone, and you can hear their spirits lift because somebody took the time to check on them and ask how they were doing. It makes them feel a bit better."

Cross says her primary objective is to help build confidence in patients to manage their lives, but also let them know that they have somebody willing to provide guidance if needed.

"When I was still in the class, I went out and did a lot of speaking to groups in the community," she says.

"And I noticed how happy people were in general to know that there was going to be somebody here for them and seeing their eyes light up knowing that they had somebody they could come and speak with. It's just making people happy and comfortable and more confident in their health and overall well-being."

**Want more details on community health workers?**

#### **Check out our webinar**

In February, as part of an NCPA continuing education webinar, Tripp Logan, PharmD, discussed how community health workers can provide value to your pharmacy. Logan vice president of Logan & Seiler Inc., described how community health workers are recognized public health professionals in almost all 50 states and serve as liaisons between health and community services. He also discussed why having an actual CHW as part of your staff is valuable for your patients and business.

**Listen to the webinar at [www.ncpanet.org/webinar](http://www.ncpanet.org/webinar).**

Logan says that a technician's skill sets make an ideal fit for transitioning to a community health worker.

"I fully support expanding the role of the pharmacy technician, and it's been something we've been advocating for at the state level for a long time," he says. "You need a strong support staff. You look at a primary care office, and they don't just have two roles there, they have a bunch, and you need to have the same in the pharmacy." ■

**Chris Linville is managing editor of *America's Pharmacist*® magazine.**