

As we move forward into the 21st Century, the only certainty that the pharmacy industry faces is change – lots of it, and at an increasingly rapid pace. Taking a look at the nature of potential changes can help us prepare for and even profit from these changes.

The role of the pharmacist behind the counter continues to evolve. In the past, a pharmacist's primary function was merely to dispense medication to the patient. Identifying the right medication, proper pill counting and occasionally compounding were part of this process.

While this continues to be true, pharmacists are increasingly responsible for educating patients and caregivers about the medications being dispensed. The person behind the counter now must make sure that any questions about the nature, benefits and side effects of the medication are answered. Getting patients involved with their own care will be an increasingly important function of the future pharmacist.

The pharmacist must also cope with a constantly updated base of knowledge. Information about established medications changes over time, especially as new uses are found for them. Then there is a constant stream of new medications appearing in the pharmacy. The pharmacist must have a working knowledge of all these things. Pharmacies must use all resources available, such as elective courses and other information sources, to make sure that pharmacists know what's happening. Also, the use of equipment that quickly assimilates new information is a must. For example, pill counters with instantly upgradeable NDC databases provide a quick solution for the pharmacist dealing with new medications.

An unfortunate wrinkle in the future of pharmacies is the increasing shortage of pharmacists. The number of graduating pharmacists is smaller than the current demand for them. While this can be beneficial to them in the short term – it is not unusual for several pharmacies to make offers to one new graduate – in the long term pharmacists will find themselves increasingly overworked and pressured. As the number of elderly Americans explodes over the next three decades, and the number of new medications steadily increases, we can expect the demand for new pharmacists to become acute.

As the century progresses, we can expect to see an increasing tension between the needs of pharmacy customers – the need for a patient to be properly educated about their own care, and how the dispensed medications must be used to facilitate that care – and the pharmacist's ability, in terms of time and knowledge, to meet them. Manufacturers of pharmacy products must be acutely aware of this tension and strive to make their products a positive benefit in relieving it.