

Pharm. D. And Lighting a Fire -- by Danielle Dresden

Although it's been 17 years since the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy made the Pharm. D. the first professional degree, there's still a wide range of opinion regarding what the shift has accomplished -- if anything.

Supporters say the mandatory Pharm. D. degree produces better-educated graduates and increases pharmacy's prestige. Detractors say it gives students unrealistic expectations, needlessly increases the cost of pharmacy education and fosters friction with other pharmacists.

In a 2006 poll by PharmacyOne Source, 26.8% said the main effect of the new requirements was to worsen the pharmacist shortage. Close to 18% said the shift had caused no significant changes, while 15.3% said it had produced better-prepared grads and another 15% said it increased pharmacists' prestige with their healthcare colleagues.

However, more than 25% listed "other," which might well be the best summary of how the field views the mandatory Pharm. D. degree.

Some say pharmacy schools and universities are the chief beneficiaries of the mandatory advanced degree, because students now pay for the clinical training they used to be paid to do.

Others say the complexity of modern medicine necessitates this extended clinical education, which is preparing a new generation to take on medication management.

However, a large part of a pharmacist's job doesn't involve clinical issues, and Pharm. D. critics say these programs create unreasonable expectations and don't prepare students for the realities of pharmacy work.

One respondent said a Pharm. D. degree may have increased new graduates' prestige, but only in their own minds. Others say the new requirement actually dilutes the value of older Pharm. D. degrees.

When new Pharm. D. expectations collide with real-world experience, friction can result. Recent graduates may be eager to strut their stuff, but long-time practitioners with Bachelor's degrees aren't likely to discount what they've learned on the job over the years.

Perhaps what's needed is to put the mandatory Pharm. D. degree in a larger career context. Although what you bring to a job is important, it's what you actually accomplish that really counts.

In other words, any degree is only the beginning of a career and subsequent behavior will show the value of that training. As William Butler Yeats said, "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of the fire." Over time, the Pharm. D. graduates themselves will show just how brightly that fire can burn.

