INTERNATIONAL PHARMACY GRADUATES IN CANADA

Issues and Challenges

ABSTRACT

International Pharmacy Graduates face numerous challenges in their quest to become licensed and practice in Canada. A collaborative of eight national pharmacy organizations has launched *Moving Forward: Pharmacy Human Resources for the Future* in an effort to understand and address these challenges.

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International pharmacy graduates in Canada: issues and challenges

Pharmacists make up the third-largest segment of health professionals in Canada. But beginning in the late 1990s, Canada (and much of the industrialized world) started to experience shortages in the pharmacist workforce, which still persist today. Negative impacts of these shortages have included cut-backs of pharmacy services (particularly in hospitals); limited access to pharmacists (and thus medications) in many rural areas; and high levels of overwork, stress and burnout among practicing pharmacists.

Shortages in health human resources are being felt in so many health professions today that the federal government recently initiated a Pan-Canadian Health Human Resources Strategy aimed at increasing the recruitment and retention of health professionals. An integral part of this strategy is to reduce the barriers to practice for internationally educated health professionals to enable them to successfully integrate into the Canadian health workforce.

Pharmacy is no exception. International Pharmacy Graduates (IPGs) are defined as pharmacists who receive their pharmacy education in a country other than Canada. Increasing Canada's uptake of IPGs might seem like one obvious solution to help mitigate some of these workforce challenges. So what's the problem?

Canada currently has more than 29,000 licensed pharmacists. It is estimated that IPGs account for close to 30% of all newly licensed pharmacists. While this percentage varies by province, it is clear that IPGs make up a substantial, and significant, portion of the pharmacy workforce. Moreover, these numbers include only those IPGs who have successfully obtained a Canadian license. IPGs face many obstacles and challenges in their quest to become licensed, and for some these challenges are insurmountable.

All pharmacists, whether IPGs or trained in Canada, must have a license granted by the province in which they wish to practice. Each province has its own specific licensing requirements, which typically include a level of language proficiency, practical experience, and the completion of a provincial jurisprudence assessment. First, however, all provinces (with the exception of Québec) require candidates to possess a Certificate of Qualification from the Pharmaceutical Examining Board of Canada.

The Pharmaceutical Examining Board of Canada (PEBC) is the national certification body for the pharmacy profession. Its mandate is to assess the qualifications of both Canadian- and foreign-trained graduates to ensure that all pharmacists entering the profession have the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities to safely and effectively practice pharmacy. To successfully achieve their Certificate of Qualification, IPGs must complete the following steps:

1) First, IPG candidates undergo a Document Evaluation in which the PEBC verifies that the candidate has acquired a legitimate university degree from an acceptable program. Candidates may do this prior to immigrating.

2) If documents are favourably evaluated, the IPG candidate is then eligible to complete an Evaluating Examination to determine if their program of study is comparable to Canadian pharmacy programs. These exams are offered in Canada, as well as in the United Kingdom.

3) IPG candidates who successfully complete the Evaluating Examination, are then eligible to challenge the two-part PEBC Qualifying Examination, which assesses the core competencies required for safe and effective practice of pharmacy. (These competencies are defined by the National Association of Pharmacy Regulatory Authorities' *Professional Competencies for Canadian Pharmacists at Entry to Practice*.) The first part of the exam is a written multiple choice session. The second part

is an Objective Structured Clinical Examination where candidates are assessed on their performance in a series of situational practice simulations. The Qualifying Examination is held only in Canada.

Both IPGs and Canadian pharmacy graduates must complete the Qualifying Examination.

According to the PEBC, over the last 10 years, there have been significant increases in the number of IPGs attempting, and passing, the Qualifying Examinations. However, there is a substantial gap between the number of candidates who successfully pass the Evaluating Examination and those that pass the Qualifying Examination, suggesting that many IPGs have great difficulty with the latter. In particular, many IPGs find the Objective Structured Clinic Examination to be quite demanding.

The challenges faced by IPGs, both in the licensing process and in practice itself, can be summarized as follows. The first challenge is language fluency and communication, since many pharmacist candidates cannot pass the provincial fluency standards. When they do, they are expected to be able to function at a language level that allows both understanding of specific medical and pharmaceutical terminology and effectively communicating this information to their patients.

Another challenge relates to the candidate's understanding and experience of disease states or treatments that they might not have encountered in their country of origin. Consider the therapeutic knowledge of a pharmacist from a country where malaria and malnutrition are prevalent, compared to Canada where frequent disease states are the polar opposite – high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes.

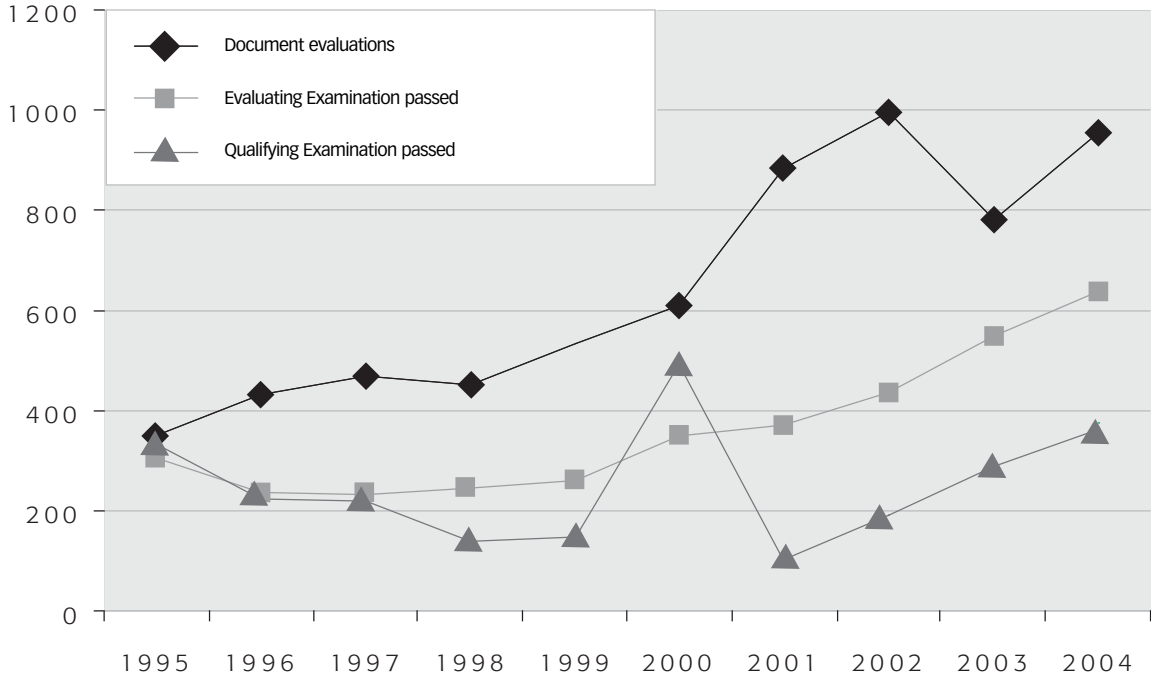
IPGs also face difficulties in "being" pharmacists in Canada; that is, in interacting with patients and other health care providers in settings where professional and cultural norms may be different from their own. Canadian health care reforms, including the move towards primary care, are also causing pharmacists to take on new and expanded medication management roles. These changes in practice present an extra level of complexity for IPGs, who are already trying to understand the existing system of Canadian pharmacy practice.

Underlying all of this are the candidate's expectations. Many IPGs report that they simply were not aware of the differences between their pharmacy experience and the standard of practice in Canada, or the length of time, effort and financial resources required to achieve their license and begin practicing. These realities can be disappointing, frustrating, and sometimes overwhelming.

It is clear that IPGs require support to successfully integrate into Canadian pharmacy practice and, in fact, a number of initiatives have been launched to provide this support.

Some Faculties of Pharmacy have developed structured "bridging" programs to assist pharmacists from other countries to gain the language, workplace and practice skills necessary for licensure and practice in Canada. One of the specific aims of these programs is to assist IPGs in preparing for the PEBC Examinations. The IPG program at the University of Toronto is the longest running pharmacy-bridging program in Canada, and its results are very positive with over 90% of participants passing the PEBC Qualifying Examinations. The University of British Columbia offers a similar bridging program, and a small number of private programs are also available. Fees for these programs range from $7,500 to $13,000.

Figure 1: Number of IPG candidates progressing through the PEBC assessment steps, 1995-2004



(source: PEBC)

The federal government also just recently announced funding to develop an orientation program to help internationally educated nurses, pharmacists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, medical laboratory technologists and medical radiation technologists to adapt to the demands of practicing in the Canadian health care system.

However, if the pharmacy workforce and IPGs themselves are to benefit equally, any efforts to facilitate the integration of IPGs into the pharmacy workforce need to be part of a coordinated, pan-Canadian, pharmacy human resources plan.

This is why *Moving Forward: Pharmacy Human Resources for the Future* was launched in 2005. Moving Forward is an in-depth examination of the factors contributing to pharmacy human resources challenges in Canada. It will offer recommendations to ensure a strong pharmacy workforce prepared to meet the future health care needs of Canadians. The project is a partnership between eight influential pharmacy organizations: the Canadian Pharmacists Association, which manages the project, the Canadian Association of Chain Drug Stores, Canadian Association of Pharmacy Technicians, Canadian Society of Hospital Pharmacists, National Association of Pharmacy Regulatory Authorities, Association of Deans of Pharmacy of Canada, Association of Faculties of Pharmacy of Canada, and the Pharmacy Examining Board of Canada.

Funded by the Government of Canada's Foreign Credential Recognition program, *Moving Forward* will focus, in particular, on the specific human resources issues and challenges faced by IPGs in the Canadian pharmacy workforce. Specific IPG research activities currently underway include:

- The development of a "roadmap" of necessary steps between immigration and successful licensure to practice;
- The creation of an inventory of available IPG support and bridging education programs;
- The collection of quantitative information to construct a demographic profile of IPGs in Canada; and
- The collection of qualitative information on the attitudes and experiences of IPGs seeking to practice in Canada.

Research activities to be completed in 2007 will examine the following questions:

1. How many IPGs are in Canada? What is their country of origin? What province or region are they located in, and what influences this choice? How many are working as pharmacists, as pharmacy technicians, or are not working in pharmacy? If not working in pharmacy, why not?
2. What information is made available to IPGs regarding licensing and practice in Canada, prior to immigration? Is it satisfactory?
3. What positions are filled by IPGs? Are they equally represented in community and hospital pharmacies, and across Canada? Do IPGs favour certain types of practice sites?
4. What gaps exist between the numbers of IPGs who apply to immigrate, those who successfully immigrate, those who attempt to become licensed, those who successfully become licensed and those who actually enter practice? What specific challenges and barriers do each of these groups face? What happens to these individuals between these steps?
5. What are the experiences of IPGs regarding integration into the Canadian pharmacy workforce? What are their expectations? What are the experiences of employers of IPGs regarding their integration into the local practice environment?
6. What bridging and support programs are available? Where are they, what do they include, how much do they cost, how are they accessed? Are they available to all IPGs?
7. How well are existing bridging and other support programs preparing IPGs for licensing and integration into pharmacy practice in Canada? What issues and challenges exist?
8. What other support mechanisms could help IPGs become licensed and integrated into pharmacy practice (for example self-assessment tools, mentorship programs, preceptor supports, and language training)?

The results of this research phase will be a body of work that identifies, explores and describes the human resources challenges facing IPGs in the Canadian pharmacy workforce. It will also provide a foundation for analysis to offer strategies and solutions to help address these challenges.

For more information, please visit www.pharmacyhr.ca.