

Yukon pharmacists optimistic about future with new regulations coming

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Pharmacists hope for an expanded scope of practice as new pharmacy regulations are drafted in the Yukon.



Josianne Gauthier, president of the Yukon Pharmacists Association and a clinical pharmacist at Whitehorse General Hospital

Pharmacists in the Yukon have waited a long time for legislative changes to improve practice standards and allow a broader scope of practice.

And by next spring, those dreams should become a reality once regulations supporting new pharmacy legislation are implemented.

The Yukon is currently in the midst of modernizing pharmacy under the Pharmacy Initiative, a multi-step process that includes a new Pharmacy and Drug Act and moving the current Pharmacists Act under the Health Professions Act.

The initial step was accomplished last month with the passing of the Pharmacy and Drug Act, the territory's first legislation to regulate operations and licensing of community pharmacy and rural dispensaries.

Supporting regulations, now being drafted, are expected to create standards of practice similar to other parts of the country with a code of ethics, licensing requirements and legislated standards.

"These changes mean a lot to pharmacists," says Josianne Gauthier, president of the Yukon Pharmacists Association and a clinical pharmacist at Whitehorse General Hospital.

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As one of three pharmacists from the association working on the government's advisory committee to update pharmacy regulations, Gauthier is hopeful about the overall direction.

“Yukon pharmacists are currently practicing in an archaic situation – we aren’t even supposed to accept faxed prescriptions – so we are looking forward to change.”

Up to now, the lack of legislative oversight on pharmacies has meant that “anyone” could open a pharmacy in the Yukon.

Although Gauthier stresses that pharmacists in Whitehorse are “extremely diligent, conscientious and professional” and there haven’t been any major problems, it is important to have regulations governing pharmacies to ensure that standards are maintained.

Moving the Pharmacists Act into the Health Professions Act is another critical step that pharmacists hope will expand their scope of practice to be similar to Alberta.

“Unlike in other jurisdictions, pharmacists in the Yukon haven’t been able to practice to their full scope,” Gauthier explains.

“That’s a big issue and a deterrent to pharmacists who come from other provinces to work here. I know of pharmacy owners who’ve had trouble recruiting staff because we don’t have expanded scope.”

Hopefully, by some time next year, pharmacists will see a phased in approach starting with authority to adapt, extend refills and provide therapeutic substitution.

“Then, if all goes well, we’ll expand our scope to include administration of drugs and lab tests,” Gauthier says. “It’s been difficult not having these authorities. Physicians who come here from other provinces just expect us to be able to do these things and we have to tell them we can’t.”

Another issue that the legislation will address is the lack of a regulatory college in the territory. While the voluntary association has taken over the role of advocating for the profession, protecting the public and offering continuing education for pharmacists, Gauthier notes that it is difficult for volunteers who also work full-time to devote so much time.

“Without a college, we don’t regulate our own profession,” Gauthier says. “That’s left to the government. Realistically we don’t expect to get a college here but the new legislation will ask for support from another college.

Since our new pharmacy regulations are being modelled on Alberta, we are told that our government will seek support from the Alberta College of Pharmacists.”

In the meantime, pharmacists will provide input on drafting new regulations with an eye on implementation next spring.

“Our timelines are short and we’re a bit nervous,” Gauthier says. “But we’ve been waiting such a long time and we’re excited, too. The government is involving us in each step of the process so we have an opportunity to make recommendations. Of course, the final say is the cabinet’s and we’ve had to spend a lot of time explaining our role to the government.”
