

Far North pharmacies break the mold

Written by Sonya Felix on November 17, 2014 for [Pharmacy Practice Plus](#)

Canada's northern territories offer pharmacists unique practice challenges and opportunities.



Pharmacists practicing in Canada's northern territories face a host of challenges that their southern peers are less likely to experience: extreme weather, limited and expensive transportation, high overhead costs, unreliable shipments, a widely dispersed customer base and a sense of isolation. But any talk of drawbacks is tempered by descriptions of the unique beauty of the landscape, the friendliness of communities where everyone knows your name and the tight collaboration among healthcare professionals.

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"This is such an interesting place to work," says Ehab Meshrif, a pharmacist at Kitnuna Pharmacy, the only retail pharmacy in Cambridge Bay, Nunavut, an island accessible only by plane. Kitnuna provides medication to the town's 1,500 people and ships medicine twice a week to five remote communities. "We don't just fill pill bottles-- we do a lot of consulting with doctors and nurses and have opportunities to use our professional judgment. When you practice pharmacy here, you aren't just running a business but have an obligation to service the wider community."

Similar sentiments are echoed by pharmacists across the north, whether in the Yukon, the Northwest Territories or Nunavut. But there are frustrations, too, particularly at slow progress towards an expanded scope of practice and lack of reimbursement for pharmacy services. And as Daryl Dolynny, a former pharmacist who is now an MLA in the Northwest Territories, points out, not having an expanded scope exacerbates issues related to recruitment and standards of practice across the region.

The Yukon

Population: (approx) 35,000

Number of community pharmacies: 6

Last spring, the Government of Yukon appointed an advisory committee to help modernize Yukon's pharmacy legislation. Over the next few months, representatives from the Yukon Pharmacists Association and other stakeholders, including physicians, nurses and pharmacy owners, met to identify issues and make recommendations about the regulation of pharmacy professions and pharmacists.

"We made a lot of progress over the summer and now we are waiting for government to take the next step by expanding our scope of practice and reimbursing us for services," says Tracee Vickerman, owner of two Medicine Chest Pharmacies in Whitehorse. "We did a lot of research by talking to pharmacy registrars across the country and sent our report to the government with the hope that we will see legislative changes by next spring."

In the meantime, Vickerman says that pharmacists are frustrated by the impact of lower generic drug pricing since Yukon's prices are modelled on Alberta. "It's been very difficult for us because we've seen a huge drop in revenues," she says, adding that, although the government unexpectedly saved a lot of money, it came out of pharmacies' pockets. "As a group we went to them and asked if they'd give us some back but it hasn't happened. Not being able to bill for services is a big problem."

Northwest Territories

Population: (approx) 45,000

Number of community pharmacies: 9

Pharmacists in the Northwest Territories are currently consulting with the government about expanding their scope of practice, says Larry Ring, owner of Ring's Pharmacy in Hay River, NWT. "We don't have full-time staff at our pharmacists' association so we've chosen Alberta as our template and our number one priority is to sit down with government to discuss what is manageable for our remoteness."

Although pharmacists have authority to provide emergency prescription refills and renew/extend prescriptions, they are not paid for these services. "There are a number of different parts of expanded scope and we'd like to start with ones such as med reviews and minor ailments," says Ring. "But we might not get what Alberta has."

Just like other parts of the country, NWT pharmacies' profits are suffering from lower generic drug pricing. "We really need to bill for services to pay for the costs of being in the north," Ring adds. "Our overhead is higher and our freight costs are higher."

Nunavut

Population: (approx) 32,000

Number of community pharmacies: 5

Expanded scope of practice isn't on the table yet in Nunavut where community pharmacists service not just their immediate area but also ship supplies to remote health centres. "We do use our professional judgement and provide refills and emergency supplies if needed," says Meshrif. "But there is nearly always access to nurses and doctors who can prescribe. And we generally don't need authority to give injections since the nurses can do that."

A few years ago, a controversy erupted when the government considered setting up a system of remote dispensing using pharmacists in Ottawa to bypass local retail pharmacies. However, that proposal did not come to pass. In 2011, the government did make changes to pharmacy services contracts by stipulating that pharmacists improve interaction with patients.

"The pharmacies contracted say they have seen an improvement in patient services," says Gogi Greeley, acting assistant deputy minister of operations in Nunavut's department of health. "Health centres will contact a pharmacy on behalf of a patient, or the patient will do so. The amount of counselling and engagement with patients has increased over time."
