

## **SHOULD I BE A COMMUNITY PHARMACY OWNER?©**

If one were to track the significant and dramatic changes in the world of pharmacy from both a business and professional perspective over the last forty years, approximately how long it has been since this writer graduated from pharmacy school (SJU, Class of '62), I believe we would all agree that they have been dramatic, to say the least. It is possible to postulate that no profession or business has been impacted on in so many different ways, from so many different aspects, with such significant results (good and bad), as the world of pharmacists and community pharmacy practice.

While I could devote thousands of words to listing these changes, year-by-year, decade-by-decade, and discussing their impact on pharmacists, I would like to focus on one that I believe is most significant, which addresses the question that is posed as the title of this column. The change I am talking about is the percentage of pharmacy graduates who eventually become community pharmacy owners. There were 74 graduates in my class at St. John's University back in 1962. The demographic makeup of the class was as follows; sixty-five men and nine women. Among the women, 6 were nuns, Dominicans (remember Sally Field as the flying nun? - that was what the Dominican habit looked like) and Jesuits, destined to practice in the hospital environment or to be part of medical missionary teams sponsored by their respective orders. The three remaining women (they were called "civilians") all had dreams of practicing in a hospital setting, as retail pharmacy had very few women involved at any level in those days.

And what of the sixty-five men? With the rare exception of those few who hoped to attend graduate school (all of whom wanted to become physicians except for one - he planned on dental school), the rest of us only yearned to practice community pharmacy in the local New York area and to own a pharmacy as soon as we could afford to purchase or open one. Sixty of my classmates (including yours truly) shared this dream and, for the most part, were able to make it happen within two to five years after graduation. Owning your own pharmacy was far and away the preferred career route for graduate pharmacists and at that point in time, there were few if any barriers to entry.

This scenario is clearly not today's world of pharmacy. Women graduates are approaching 80% at most if not all the pharmacy schools in the country. Young pharmacists, men and women, are not gravitating toward independent practice in

anywhere near the numbers they did in the past. Owning one's own pharmacy is often either not an option at all or not one that most young pharmacists consider, nor is it one that is particularly encouraged by many people these young pharmacists come in contact with including educators, newly graduated and employed pharmacists, often their parents or current employers.

What is driving this syndrome? Why are today's young pharmacists not wanting to own their own pharmacies in anywhere near the numbers they did in the 60's and 70's? From my perspective, the key drivers are:

- Economics – When you couple today's incredibly high salaries for staff and supervisory pharmacists in the chains, often at or above \$100,000.00 per year, with the need to repay substantial student loans incurred during an expensive six year education, it speaks to these graduates wanting to earn as much as they can, as fast as they can.
- Women in Pharmacy – When one considers that more than 50% of today's practicing pharmacists are women, as are more than 80% of current pharmacy students, there is a message in the fact that as best it can be quantified, less than 3% of the independent community pharmacies in the country are currently owned by women. While there seem to be no special barriers to entry for women to become owners, there are some social and family aspects that impact on this component.
- Pharmacists Marrying Pharmacists – There seem to be many more pharmacist couples today than ever before, no doubt driven by the fact that the ratio of men to women in pharmacy school is far different than it was years ago. Since many of us meet our eventual spouses while at college (I did, but she wasn't a pharmacy student), it seems logical that young pharmacists will meet, interact and commit to each other during their six years together in school, then marry after graduation. This produces an incredibly high earning family (two pharmacists' salaries instead of one) at a very early stage in life. It seems there would be little economic motivation for a pharmacist couple to want to own their own business.

With all of this information as the preamble, my personal feelings and long experience in the profession tell me that there are three core reasons why young pharmacists should give preference to owning their own pharmacy, rather than spending their career as employee pharmacists. These reasons are:

- Economics – Not only is the economic opportunity a better one in the long run (I will address this issue in detail in future columns), the opportunity to build equity for the future as part of your work efforts is far, far greater than any public company stock option plan.

- Professional Satisfaction – The ability to practice pharmacy the way you want to, the way you envision it to be, is only there for those who make it happen, their way. Otherwise, you will be an employee, play by the company rules, rather than making your own.
- Control of Your Own Destiny – Owning your own business, while often stressful, still provides a level of control in your personal life, of time, effort, economics and activity that you can only have when you are the boss, as opposed to the employee.

While none of this is simple, it is possible in today's world of pharmacy for young pharmacists to own their own pharmacies within a reasonable time after graduation. And while there are risks, economic, professional and social, to this direction, there are also great rewards, rewards that a lot of young pharmacists are missing out on today. As a young graduate pharmacist, or soon to be a graduate, you owe it to yourself to explore the opportunity to own your own pharmacy, be your own person, live life and practice your profession the way you want to.

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