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Beyond dispensing: The expanding role of the pharmacist

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Summary

Pharmacists play an increasingly broad role in the US healthcare system, extending beyond dispensing to, patient education, medication management, safety monitoring, care coordination, public health, and coverage and policy decisions. This Insight maps six “domains” of pharmacist practice and uses retail pharmacy as a key example of how pharmacists connect patients with providers, payers, manufacturers, and other parts of the healthcare system.

Background

The role of pharmacists in the US has evolved significantly in recent years. There are approximately 322,000 practicing pharmacists across the US, making it one of the most widely distributed healthcare professions in the country.¹ With approximately 90% of Americans living within five miles of a retail pharmacy, pharmacists are among the nation’s most accessible healthcare professionals, often serving as a first and frequent point of clinical contact for the public.² Despite this visibility, the full scope of the pharmacist's role is frequently underestimated. Once primarily associated with dispensing medications, pharmacists today operate across a broad and expanding range of clinical, administrative, and public health functions — in retail pharmacies, hospitals, specialty and long-term care settings, pharmacy benefit pt

This evolution reflects the increasingly interconnected nature of the US healthcare system. Today, pharmacists serve as connective tissue across healthcare settings, linking patients to providers, payers to prescribers, and clinical care to public health infrastructure. At the same time, the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) projects a shortage of over 30,000 pharmacists by 2038,³ a gap that makes it all the more critical that policymakers understand the full breadth of the pharmacist's role and the considerations associated with changes to the integrated systems in which they operate.

The structural relationships between pharmacies and other healthcare entities, as well as the role of pharmacists, are now at the center of an active policy debate. Building on the passage of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2026 – which enacted reforms to pharmacy benefit managers (PBMs) – Congress continues to consider proposals that would further reshape structural relationships across the healthcare system, including pharmacy ownership. At the state level, all 50 states have enacted at least one PBM-related law.⁴

Simultaneously, over 100 scope-of-practice bills were introduced across 41 states in the first half of 2026 alone, reflecting broad recognition of the pharmacist's growing clinical value.⁵ This insight provides an

¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics, May 2025. Available [here](#)

² Berenbrok L, et al. Access to community pharmacies: A nationwide geographic information systems cross-sectional analysis. *Journal of the American Pharmacists Association*, 2022; 62, 1816-1822.e. Available [here](#)

³ HRSA National Center for Health Workforce Analysis, Health Workforce Projections, December 2025. Available [here](#)

⁴ Based on Avalere Health’s State Policy 360 Tracking, Available [here](#)

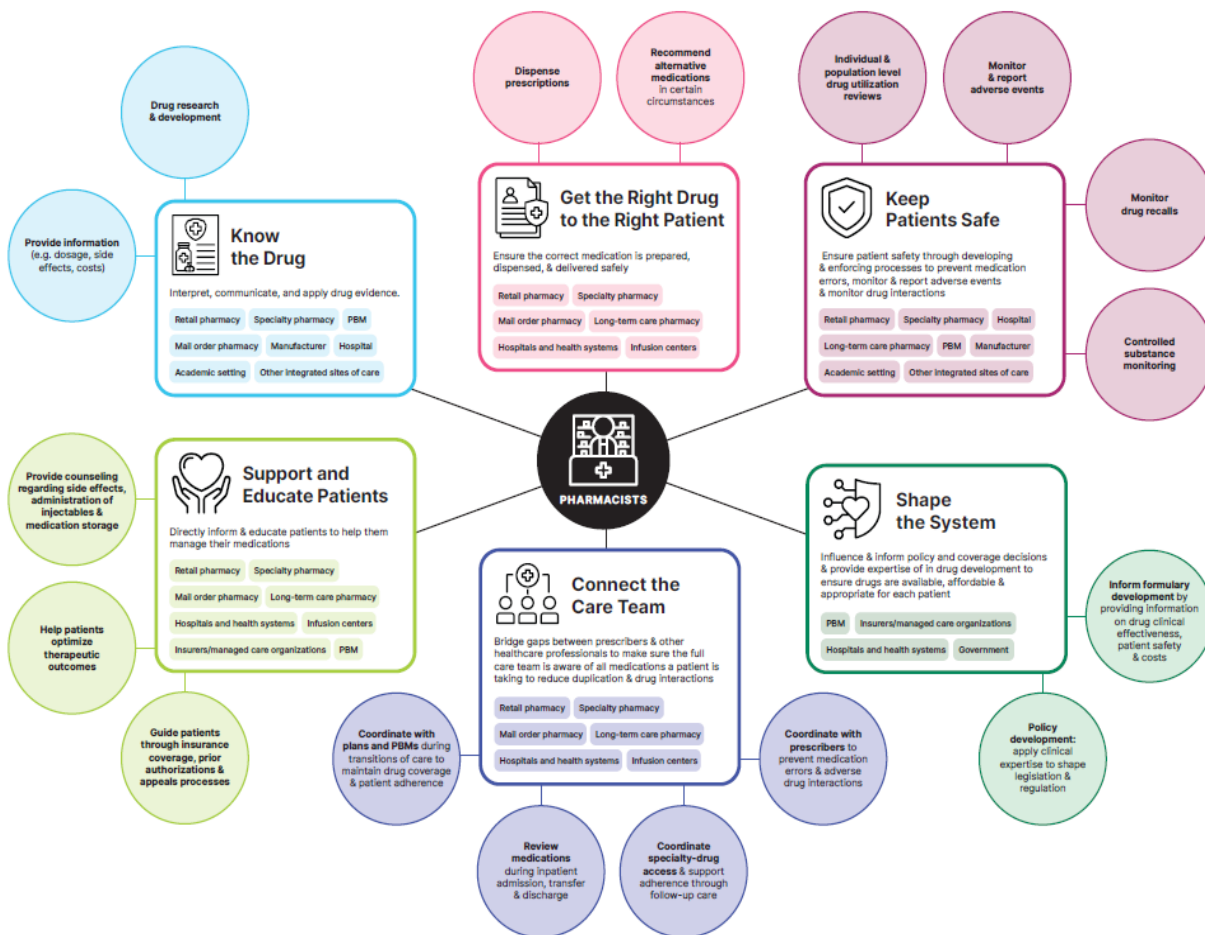
⁵ National Alliance of State Pharmacy Associations, 2026 Mid-Year Legislative and Regulatory Update, July 2026. Available [here](#)

overview of the role of the pharmacist across the healthcare ecosystem, with a focused look at the retail pharmacy setting.

Core domains of pharmacist practice across the healthcare system

From drug development to patient care, pharmacists are present at every stage of the medication journey. The graphic below maps six core domains of pharmacist activity across the healthcare ecosystem, illustrating how pharmacists serve patients, connect care teams, and contribute to the systems that govern drug access and safety.

Figure 1. The pharmacist's role across the healthcare ecosystem



Know the drug

Interpret, communicate, and apply drug evidence

Pharmacists are key providers of drug information across all major settings within the US healthcare system. Pharmacists provide information to individual patients, families, and healthcare providers.

Examples include:

- **Retail, Specialty, Mail order pharmacy:** Pharmacists provide information to patients on the route of administration (ROA), mechanism of action, patient cost sharing, side effects or adverse events, dosing schedule, potential drug interactions, proper storage, and prescription refill.
- **PBM:** Pharmacists' drug expertise is used in conducting comparative effectiveness and cost-effectiveness analyses, developing drug and drug-class monographs, and identifying competitors in a class for use in coverage and price negotiation with manufacturers.

Pharmacists are instrumental to drug research and development in pharmaceutical manufacturing and academic settings.

- **Pharmaceutical manufacturer:** Pharmacists help develop new drugs and create novel drug formulations based on knowledge of chemistry and pharmacology. Pharmacists also work as clinical liaisons to healthcare providers, serving as drug representatives and medical science liaisons.
- **Academic settings:** Pharmacists support research across a range of fields, including clinical research, health outcomes, public health, and pharmacy-practice research.

Get the right drug to the right patient

Ensure the right drug reaches the right patient, through correct preparation, dispensing, and delivery.

Pharmacists dispense drugs and fill prescriptions across a range of settings.

- **Retail pharmacy:** Pharmacists review prescriptions for accuracy, check for drug interactions, prepare medications according to the correct dosage, label prescriptions with administration and dosing instructions, and dispense prescriptions to patients.
- **Specialty pharmacy:** At specialty pharmacies, the dispensing process can involve pharmacists directly dispensing drugs that can safely be administered at home. Some medications that involve intravenous infusions or injections are required to be administered by a physician, in which case a pharmacist can help coordinate delivery of the dispensed medication to the provider's office.
- **Mail order pharmacy:** Pharmacists review prescription for appropriateness, interactions, dose, and safety. From there, the medication is filled and shipped.
- **Hospital:** Pharmacists ensure the correct dose of a drug is dispensed and delivered to a patient by a medical professional.
- **Long-term care pharmacy:** Pharmacists help patients manage complex, chronic conditions by dispensing medications and examining residents' medication regimens to reduce duplication and ensure the medications are appropriate for the patient's age and condition.
- **Infusion center:** Pharmacists prepare and manage complex intravenous and injectable drugs. Prior to a patient receiving an infusion, pharmacists review their medical chart and lab results,

calculate exact drug doses based on patient diagnosis and medical history, and monitor the infusion treatment for adverse events.

If needed, pharmacists recommend alternative medications. Pharmacists evaluate and recommend alternative medications when the originally prescribed drug is clinically inappropriate, contraindicated, unavailable, not covered by the patient's insurance, or to address other access issues. .

- **Retail pharmacy:** Pharmacists can identify covered or lower-cost alternatives when a prescription is rejected by the patient's insurance or carries a high out-of-pocket cost.
- **Hospital:** Pharmacists recommend alternative therapies based on the hospital formulary, patient-specific clinical factors, medication shortages, allergies, organ function, interactions, or institutional treatment guidelines.
- **Specialty pharmacy:** Pharmacists evaluate clinically appropriate alternatives when a specialty medication is not covered or is contraindicated.

Pharmacists administer immunizations in retail pharmacies, in addition to other clinical services, subject to state scope of practice laws and regulations.

- **Retail pharmacy:** Pharmacists discuss and review a patient's medical history, current medications, and contraindications prior to administering an immunization in accordance with CDC guidelines. Pharmacists provide education and counseling to patients receiving immunization and monitor patients for potential side effects after administration.
- **Hospital/Physician office:** Pharmacists can provide immunizations to patients at inpatient or outpatient hospitals.

Keep patients safe

Ensure patient safety through developing and enforcing processes to prevent medication errors, report adverse events, and monitor drug interactions.

Pharmacists conduct drug utilization reviews (DUR), to evaluate drug therapy trends before or after medication is dispensed to identify prescribing patterns or system issues. This takes place across all settings where pharmacists work, including:

- **Retail pharmacy:** Pharmacists conduct individual patient DUR prior to dispensing a drug
- **Specialty pharmacy, Long-term care pharmacy, PBM:** Pharmacists conduct population-level DURs to help PBMs understand and evaluate the prescribing and administration of medications. DURs can either be prospective or retrospective.
 - **Prospective DUR:** Pharmacists evaluate drug therapy trends before medication is dispensed, which involves setting up systems to catch issues and identify any fraud, waste, or abuse patterns, inappropriate prescribing or incorrect dosing, and drug-disease conflicts.
 - **Retrospective DUR:** Pharmacists look back at what has already been dispensed to the population and confirm that the prescriptions were appropriate and can follow up with prescribers if any issues are identified in their review.

Support and educate patients

Directly inform and educate patients to help them manage their medications.

Pharmacists conduct Medication Therapy Management (MTM) – which involves targeted and comprehensive medication reviews – to optimize therapeutic outcomes, prevent costly medical problems, and educate patients on their medications. Targeted medication reviews focus on a specific medication, whereas comprehensive medication reviews focus on all of a patient's medications. MTM involves in-depth medication-related education, consultation, and advice provided to patients, family and/or caregivers to assure proper use of medications.

- **PBM:** Pharmacists review medications for a subset of plan members or beneficiaries to address any medication issues, such as medications not being taken properly, duplication of medications, or unnecessary medications.
- **Retail, Specialty, Mail order pharmacy:** Pharmacists review all specialty medications prescribed to a patient and address any medication issues, such as medications not being taken properly, duplication of medications, or unnecessary medications.
- **Long-term care pharmacy:** Pharmacists review individual resident charts to understand patient medications and ensure residents continue to receive appropriate doses and that drug interactions are effectively managed.

Pharmacists serve as a primary medication expert throughout a patient's course of therapy.

Pharmacists provide individual support and education on how to self-administer complex injectables or biologics, store certain medications, and manage side effects or missed doses. Pharmacists can also guide patients through prior authorizations and appeal denied claims for medications.

- **Retail, Specialty, Mail order pharmacy:** Pharmacists serve as a direct point of contact for medication questions or concerns at the pharmacy counter
- **Hospital:** Pharmacists provide in-hospital and pre-discharge education on prescribed therapies.
- **Payer/Managed care organization:** Pharmacists bridge the gap between providers and payers, discussing patient prescriptions with providers, providing recommendations in accordance with clinical guidelines and plan formularies, and informing providers of UM requirements in place by the plan.

Connect the care team

Bridge gaps between prescribers and other healthcare professionals to make sure the full care team is aware of all medications a patient is taking to reduce duplication and drug interactions.

One critical opportunity for connection takes place at the **transitions between settings of care.**

Pharmacists work closely with other healthcare professionals in a number of inpatient and outpatient settings and can help support transition of care between these settings to ensure continued patient adherence and medication management.

- **Payer, PBM:** Pharmacists bridge the gap between plans and PBMs during transitions between care settings to ensure proper drug utilization and management and coverage of prescribed medications from one setting to another

- **Long-term care, Hospital:** Conduct medication reconciliation during admission, transfer, and discharge, resolve discrepancies between hospital and outpatient medication lists
- **Specialty pharmacy:** Coordinate specialty-drug access among prescribers, payers, pharmacies, and patients and support adherence through follow-up with care teams.

Shape the system

Influence and inform policy and coverage decisions and provide expertise in drug development to ensure drugs are available, affordable, and appropriate for each patient.

One key point of influence is formulary development. **Pharmacists help determine formulary coverage policies**, including appropriate utilization management (UM) techniques based on clinical effectiveness, patient safety, and costs.

- **PBM, Payer, Hospital/Health System:** Pharmacists serve on pharmacy and therapeutics (P&T) committees, where they help plans, PBMs, or hospitals evaluate the comparative safety, efficacy, and value of medications to develop formularies and inform formulary placement. This involves evaluating drug clinical and economic value to ensure hospital patients and plan enrollees have access to clinically appropriate and cost-effective drug formularies.
- **P&T Committee Roles:**
 - *Creating Drug Monographs:* Clinical pharmacists conduct a literature review and evidence analysis, compiling a comprehensive, unbiased evidence review, called a drug monograph.
 - *Voting Members of P&T Committees:* Voting P&T members discuss relative merits of a new drug compared to existing alternatives and vote on the drug's clinical value.
 - *Coverage Criteria Development:* Pharmacists assess clinical evidence to determine when UM strategies, including prior authorization, step therapy, and quantity limits, are appropriate to promote safe and cost-effective medication use.

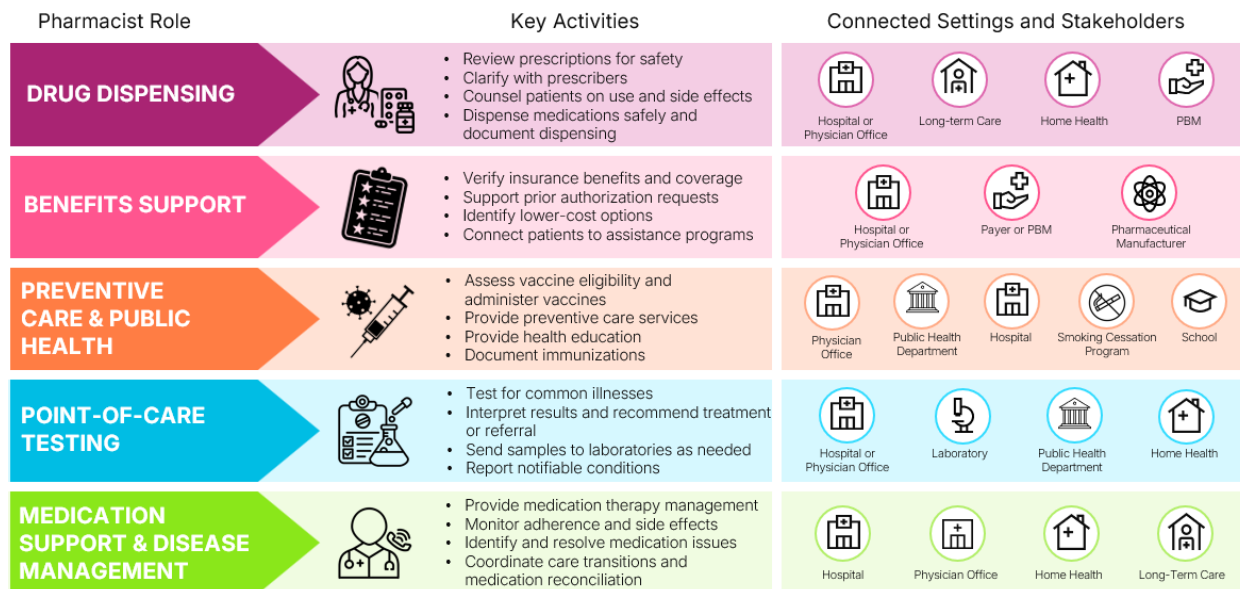
Pharmacists also shape legislative and regulatory guidance and other policy development activities.

- **Government:** Pharmacists work at agencies including The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), state Medicaid agencies, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to provide expertise on drug selection and alternatives, clinical guidance, and safety to support policy development and implementation.
- **Other roles throughout drug development, regulatory, policy, legal, and government fields:** Pharmacists serve additional roles in the healthcare system and are instrumental from drug research and development (e.g., creating new drug formulations, administering and overseeing clinical trials) to shaping law and policy.

The role of the pharmacist extends beyond the pharmacy counter

Among the intersection points between the pharmacist and the healthcare system, perhaps the most familiar is the interaction between a patient and pharmacist behind the counter at a retail pharmacy. However, the retail pharmacist's role and impact span far beyond filling prescriptions, playing a complex and critical role in the healthcare system. Traditionally, a pharmacist's role at a retail pharmacy is to dispense medications and advise patients on their use. Today, pharmacists' roles are significantly more expansive. The retail pharmacy setting offers an illustrative glimpse into the diverse role of pharmacists and how their role fits within the broader patient care journey.

Figure 2. Retail pharmacists serve as a bridge across healthcare settings and stakeholders



Drug dispensing: Dispense medications to individual patients to fill a prescription

Patient-Pharmacist interaction: Prior to dispensing, a pharmacist confirms prescription information and conducts a prospective drug utilization review, screening for issues such as therapeutic duplication, drug-disease contraindications, and drug interactions. Where appropriate, pharmacists verify that controlled substances can legally and appropriately be dispensed, and document the dispensing (such as through a state's prescription drug monitoring program). A pharmacist also provides information on the prescription to the patient, including dosing information and side effects. Patients may discuss medication questions with pharmacists. Depending on the questions or potential concerns or questions raised, pharmacists may connect with:

- **Hospital or Physician office:** Clarify prescriptions, recommend medication adjustments, and provide updates on adherence or adverse effects

- **Long-term care facilities:** Ensure ongoing medication supply, review medication regimens, and communicate therapeutic or dosing changes
- **Home health services:** Coordinate medication delivery and dispensing and provide education to patients and caregivers
- **PBMs:** Identify alternative medications when prescribed medications are not covered

Benefits support: Provide benefits verification and prior authorization support by verifying a patient's prescription insurance benefits and medication coverage, helping patients navigate copay support or patient assistance programs, assisting with prior authorization requests by gathering clinical documentation. Through benefits verification and support, pharmacists may connect with:

- **Hospital or Physician office:** Work with prescribing providers to obtain clinical documentation for prior authorization
- **Payer/PBMs:** Verify a patient's benefit information and coverage with the patient's insurance provider (e.g., Veteran's Administration or Tricare, employer-sponsored insurance, Medicare Part D plan)
- **Pharmaceutical manufacturers:** Connect patients with patient assistance programs provided by manufacturers to help with financial support of prescriptions

Public health and preventive care: Screen and educate patients on vaccine eligibility and benefits and can administer most vaccines recommended for adults (e.g., flu, pneumonia, HPV). Dependent on state-specific laws and flexibilities, provide a range of additional preventive care services, including assessing and prescribing hormonal contraceptives and prescribing tobacco cessation aids; and provide disease prevention and health promotion education. Pharmacists facilitate connections across settings:

- **Physician office:** Share immunization records, notify prescribing providers of vaccines administered, refer patients for additional preventive care services
- **Public health departments:** Provide support to vaccination or health promotion campaigns, share information on immunization records and disease outbreaks
- **Hospitals:** Coordinate with hospitals to provide continuity of care and disease prevention or immunization administration
- **Smoking cessation programs:** Recommend over-the-counter nicotine replacement therapies, prescribe cessation aids depending on state scope of practice laws, and refer individuals to support programs or counseling
- **Schools:** Administer vaccines and support public health initiatives on school campuses

Point-of-care testing: Conduct patient assessments for acute illnesses such as strep, flu, COVID-19, UTI, conjunctivitis, and other minor ailments and recommend appropriate treatment. Point-of-care testing creates connections across settings for referrals, reporting, and follow-up care as needed, such as through:

- **Hospital or Physician office:** Refer patients to other healthcare providers based on test results if additional care or urgent treatment is required
- **Laboratories:** Send samples to laboratories and refer patients for more extensive testing if required
- **Public health departments:** Report case numbers for infectious disease outbreaks or annual flu counts for local and state reporting

- **Home health:** Coordinate additional follow-up care for patients who received testing

Medication support and disease management: Provide chronic disease management and medication therapy management (MTM); monitor medication effectiveness, adherence, and adverse reactions.

Pharmacists conduct MTM for certain patients, which may lead to follow-up care or coordination with:

- **Physician office:** Communicate medication-related findings and recommendations to providers, address adherence concerns
- **Hospitals:** Support medication reconciliation and medication management following hospital discharge, including identifying discrepancies, adherence barriers, or medication-related problems and coordinating follow-up with the patient's care team
- **Long-term care:** Identify and communicate any medication-related irregularities
- **Home health:** Support medication review, reconciliation, adherence, and identification of medication-related problems in coordination with the home health team and prescriber

Conclusion

Pharmacists' roles extend far beyond dispensing medications. Across retail, hospital, specialty, managed care, and other settings, pharmacists serve as drug experts, patient educators, stewards of patient safety, and critical links between patients, providers, payers, and the broader healthcare system.

As pharmacists take on expanding responsibilities across the healthcare system, their ability to access and exchange timely information across settings of care remains central to their function. Policy discussions affecting pharmacy practice and ownership structures may have implications for these information flows and pharmacists and should be a key consideration for policymakers.

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