Pharmacy Technician:

I am a pharmacy technician. I'm relatively new to the field but have had a successful career so far. I became a licensed pharm tech in September of 2008. I got licensed by taking a 3 month pharm tech program at CLC and applying for a license with the state of Illinois. I then went a step further by getting nationally certified by taking the PTCB (Pharmacy Technician Certification Board) exam, which made me far more marketable to employers, and put me a step ahead of my competition. In my 8 month career, I've had two different jobs. My first job was in a retail setting and I had it for almost 5 months. I left that job when I got my current one, which is at a large pharmacy benefit management company. But enough about my successes…you probably want to know what I do on a daily basis and how I got to where I am now. I'll tell you a little about my day at each setting and how I've grown into where I am now in such a short period of time.

Retail Pharmacy Setting:

My first position out of school was in a retail pharmacy. When I started looking for jobs, I noticed a lot of large drugstores and retail settings had 24-hour pharmacies that were short-staffed for the overnight shifts. Realizing I was going to need to be flexible with my hours since it was my first pharm tech job, I offered to work the overnight shifts. I got a job within one month of searching. I worked from 11pm-7am. Because I had so much flexibility, I was nicely compensated, and I think it really helped me get a job quickly. I started work at 11pm four nights a week (including some weekends), and had a one hour lunch each shift.

During my workday I got a lot of face time with patients. People would walk up to the counter and I would greet them and take their prescriptions. Then came the fun stuff- I would interpret scripts and doctors' instructions and create and print medical labels for each order. I would count pills for all orders, call doctors' to inquire if one generic brand could substitute if the first choice was unavailable or to see if patient could wait until the order is placed and delivered to the pharmacy from the supplier (if something wasn't immediately available). For the more complicated orders, I would mix compounds as ordered by the doctor. This part was more challenging as I had to be capable of recognizing full chemical names of drugs including NDC and GPI numbers. It also helped me a lot to recognize the class of any given drug (such as diazepam= Valium and alprazolam= Zanax). After I completed the order, I would ensure it was packaged and labeled correctly and, of course, double check that everything was accurate with the pharmacist on duty. Then I'd take it to the check-out counter and deliver it to the patient and ring them up. If someone had insurance, I was responsible for processing the order through their insurance and dealing with any problems that arose from it (rejections or complications). This was probably the most frustrating part, but it gave me a feeling of accomplishment when I'd get through the issue (when it was resolvable, that is), and I think it showed the patient that I really cared, which is rewarding. Lastly, I would ask if they had questions about the prescription and if they did, that was my cue to get the pharmacist. Something I could ABSOLUTELY not do was answer patient questions. That is reserved exclusively for the pharmacist. Since we encountered a bit of down-time during the overnight shift, I also was responsible for recording stock and inventory and keeping the pharmacy tidy. There's

no room for clutter, mess or mistakes in this field, and the more efficient we made our setting, the easier our job was.

A lot of what retail pharm techs do happens away from the counter, and I have to admit, that's the stuff I enjoy the most. I don't think most people realize what all goes into it. It requires a lot of education- either formal or on-the-job. But it also requires a good level of people skills, since pharm techs are usually the first person patients see when they approach the pharmacy. Pharm techs need excellent computer skills and the ability to retain details concerning drugs, contraindications and ingredients. And pharm techs really need great time management, organization and prioritizing skills. My pharmacy guaranteed most orders in 30 minutes or less- a very difficult feat when you have to get on the phone with doctors, mix compounds and label properly, all while doing the same for other patients at the same time! It was a great position, but after a few months I was ready to move into more of a corporate setting. Being a pharm tech in a retail pharmacy requires you to be on your feet all shift, and that can get exhausting!

Corporate Pharmacy Setting:

My new job is working for a huge and growing pharmacy benefit management company . My company services as the real time processors of retail pharmacy purchases by verifying eligibility with insurance coverage for any given drug purchase. I work closely with clients, retail pharmacy employees such as pharm techs and pharmacists who are trying to process drug purchases. I must understand rejections, the codes used and be able to interpret rejections to the pharmacy personnel or the insurance member, such as DUR (drug utilization review) rejects, therapeutic and ingredient duplication rejects, etc. Some might consider it a stressful job, but I enjoy the challenge and the pay is incredible, and the hours are a little more predictable. I now work from 8am-5pm Monday through Friday, so it's easier for me to manage family obligations. I also received a 41% pay increase at initial job offer! After 90 days I'm eligible for a raise and there are ton of other career routes I can take now that I'm employed by a large company.

Other Possible Work Settings/Career Paths:

I personally worked in a retail pharmacy and then a corporate benefit management company but there are other career options, depending on what your preference is. You can work in a Long Term Care facility or hospital if you like more hands-on stuff, or an insurance company or private pharmacy service if you want an alternate career route, just to name a few. Even within those settings, there are multiple routes. In retail, for example, you can become a supervisor, manager or trainer, too. Typically, you'd be responsible for your own particular pharmacy techs or even move up to the regional level. And if you really like the work, you can move on to pharmacy school and become a pharmacist. It's a huge commitment, but worth it if you decide to pursue it. Pharmacists have the final understanding of the drug being given to any given patient and how that drug will interact with anything else the patient is taking. They have the legal responsibility of recognition. They can also consult patients.

Biggest Challenges:

My career is a very rewarding one, but there are definitely some challenges you have to be prepared for. The constant change in drug manufacturers being used can be tough to keep track of. You always have to keep up with the evolving industry. There's also no room for error- people's lives are on the line and we just can't make mistakes. You also have to have a knack for math and science, or at least an interest in learning it. An interest in chemistry and microbiology helps you understand drug classes, chemical interaction within the body on a molecular level when taking drugs, comprehension of virus and bacteria when introduced into the body, and an understanding of body absorption rates as drugs clear themselves out of a system (like waiting long enough to have a surgical procedure when coming off of Plavix). An interest in math is important because it helps learning formulas to figure dosages and dose conversions. But don't worry- a good training program or on-the-job trainer will help you learn this stuff, and you always have the pharmacist there to confirm things.

Biggest Rewards:

There are a ton of rewards associated with this professional. Personally, I love my job because there is always something to learn, whether a new compound, a new insurance regulations, a new patient with a drug that is new to me or just keeping up with the ever changing brand names and generic names. So really, to me, the biggest challenges lead to the biggest rewards. But I also really love the daily variety and the diverse array of occupational avenues available within the profession. And I must admit, the pay scale available once you really get in the field is much wider than I thought it would be when I initially entered the field, too! There is also a high demand for qualified folks in this field. It's a growing field, and the need for pharm techs is high. While it was tough to get in and get going, I definitely see my career horizons growing now!