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ON STAYING COMPETENT

As this editorial is being written, the teams in the "biggie" of American professional football—the National Football League—are in the process of making the final cuts in their rosters of players to meet the numerical limit permitted each team for the playing season. Consequently, the sports pages of the daily newspapers duly report the lists of names, many of whom were recent star players, who were given their termination notices in the cut-downs of the previous day.

As we read about the fate of one particular well-known place-kicker, we were reminded of the maxim that "staying is harder than getting there!" How true!

All of this has a very important lesson for pharmacy, pharmacists, and pharmaceutical scientists. As students, all of us worked hard to acquire the knowledge necessary to qualify for graduation and attain the academic degrees for which we were striving. Finally, one day we "arrived" and then joined the ranks of the professionally employed.

But rather than signaling the end of books, lectures, and learning, we found that this was just a transition to journals, short courses, and continuing education. Or, at least that is what we should have discovered if we did not want to become rapidly obsolete because our personal knowledge stood still while science and the world moved onward.

The American Pharmaceutical Association has long recognized this fact of life, and that explains why the Association has continually devoted so much of its efforts and resources to providing professional journals, technical book publications, and educational meeting programs. In recent years, this APhA activity has greatly expanded and become more specialized and sophisticated by offering various workshops, seminars, and short courses via its subdivisions, the Academy of Pharmacy Practice and the Academy of Pharmaceutical Sciences.

But, as in all other things in life, there must be some guidelines and directions as to what such programs should include or cover if they are to fulfill their objectives in a reasonably effective manner. In turn, this requires that we know the educational needs of those we seek to assist.

The American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy had similar concerns. Although the primary emphasis of the AACP and its member schools is the training of students to enter the profession, they shared with APhA the belief that there is an obligation to look after the ongoing educational needs of practitioners out in the field.

Out of this mutual recognition came the undertaking of a joint APhA/AACP Continuing Competency in Pharmacy Project. This project has been underway for over six years and a high point was reached during this past year with the release of a document entitled the *National Study of the Practice of Pharmacy* and the subsequent publication of "Standards of Practice" for the profession. These so-called "standards" simply reflect accepted, contemporary, high-level professionalism. They provide a reference point or bench mark for those out in the field to use as a basis to compare their own knowledge and performance, to identify any deficiencies, and then to move forward in filling any such gaps.

Both APhA and AACP have been pleased with the generally positive—indeed, enthusiastic—reception from educators, practitioners, and scientists that has been accorded the Continuing Competency Project. But recently, there has been a dissenting voice from one pharmacy organization. Its president said he "cannot understand the rush," and that competency is not "a burning issue."

But in his speech he went on to clarify that timing was neither his only nor his fundamental objection. Rather, he questioned the basic concept that there is a need for professional accountability. He stated that, "I dislike the idea of being accountable for my competency." The thrust of the speech was that each pharmacist has his or her own personal standards and that should be sufficient for the purpose.

There is no question but that the belief among either practitioners or scientists that "we are competent because we say we are competent" has appeal. Certainly, it is a very comfortable posture to take.

Correspondingly, most of those battle-scarred football veterans who got cut from their team rosters this fall also had the supreme confidence of self-made achievers. But that wasn't sufficient for a public that wants the best performance for its money. Professional competency, just like athletic skill, requires constant and continual attention to maintain it at peak performance. Staying is indeed harder than getting there! —EGF