

COVID-19 and Its Aftereffects



Marsha K. Millonig
B.Pharm., M.B.A.

THIS IS ONE OF THE WORST TRAVEL SEASONS IN MY memory, and it may be in yours, too. Every day there is another story about airline flight cancellations and delays and their impact on travelers. There were tens of thousands of cancellations over Father's Day weekend and the Juneteenth holiday. According to the FlightAware flight tracking website on Friday, June 24, there were more than 21,000 flight delays and 2,825 flight cancellations overall, and 6,370 flight delays and 711 cancellations into, out of, or within the United States.

News stories on the situation name numerous factors that are impacting travel:

- Staff shortages, including pilots, flight crew, baggage handlers, and others.
- Aircraft shortages.
- Maximum threshold hours for pilots being reached.
- Weather problems.

The airlines, like many industries, are still in postpandemic recovery mode. There were staff layoffs and early retirements during the pandemic, when airline travel demand dropped. The industry was not sure how air travel would rebound. Now, postpandemic, many people can't wait to travel, and the demand for air travel is at record levels. Yet the airlines say they are 12,000 pilots short. And pilot certifications are not meeting this demand. According to the American Airline Pilots Association, only 8,000 pilots have been certified during the past year. Also contributing to the shortage are changes in pay, benefits, and retirement structures put in place after 9/11 that

Pharmacy has been impacted by the pandemic in many ways. As an essential service, many pharmacies actually expanded hours to meet patient demand for their medication-related needs.

decreased the pilot training pool. As in many other industries, airline employees have found new occupations after the pandemic.

Pharmacy has also been impacted by the pandemic in many ways. As an essential service, many pharmacies actually expanded hours to meet patient demand for their medication-related needs. Additionally, once COVID vaccines were approved, pharmacies saw demand for vaccines and related services soar — at times to the breaking point. Many of my pharmacist colleagues who were close to retirement decided to leave their positions early, with the demands of the pandemic a contributing factor. The same holds true for pharmacy technicians who saw their

scope of practice expand during the pandemic, with many now trained and authorized to provide immunizations.

The profession is experiencing a severe shortage of pharmacy technicians. The CEO of the Pharmacy Technician Certification Board (PTCB), William Schimmel, attributes pharmacy technician vacancies and high turnover to “disruptions related to the COVID-19 pandemic.” A recent survey conducted by the PTCB and the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP) found the pharmacy technician turnover rate had tripled to between 21% and 30% in 2021 compared to the last survey conducted in 2019. Administrators that responded to the survey said they had lost at least 41% of their technicians.

And it is not only within the hospital environment. Community pharmacies have been impacted as well. Because of pharmacy technician vacancies, I have been working two to three times as

continued on next page

frequently at the pharmacy where I fill in, providing coverage. To try to manage the workload, many pharmacies have closed their drive-thru windows or are cutting hours. I have found that frequently when I have called another pharmacy to have a patient's prescription transferred, they are closing at 6:00 p.m. rather than 9:00 p.m. during weekdays. My colleagues are reporting similar issues in other parts of the country. I talked to two community pharmacists this week on the West Coast and in the South who have been at their pharmacies for nearly two decades. One said, "We are all looking to job shift because retail has gotten so awful." The other noted, "More help would be good. I come to work, and there is a person waiting to get a COVID shot, three people are lined up to get their prescriptions, there is a backlog of work to do, and now they want me to start doing booster shots for children."

Part of the pharmacy technician issue stems from low pay and the ability to find much better paying positions given the postpandemic shortage of workers in many industries. The May 2022 unemployment rate remained low at 3.6%, about the same as before the pandemic (see <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empsit.pdf>). According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the transportation, healthcare and social assistance, and accommodation and food sectors have had the highest numbers of job openings. In 2021, the U.S. Chamber reports "more than 47 million workers quit their jobs, many of whom were in search of an improved work-life balance and flexibility, increased compensation, and a strong company culture."

The pharmacy environment can be stressful. Patients can be demanding — they are frustrated they can't always walk in for an immunization, they get impatient waiting for their prescriptions to be filled, and at times misplace their anger about their medication's cost onto the pharmacy staff. Why not leave this stressful job and go work for \$20 or more an hour somewhere else, like the other 47 million workers?

Efforts are underway to address this situation. Walmart announced that it would be hiring 5,000 pharmacy technicians with starting pay at more than \$20 per hour — a sizable increase

ASHP has launched PharmTech Ready, a resource that can help bridge the professional development and training gaps that were also identified as drivers of the current nationwide shortage of pharmacy technicians.

from typical pay in the community setting. The starting pay currently, according to the Pharmacytechnicianguide.com is \$25,400 annually, which is \$12.21 per hour for a full-time position. That will bring pay in line with or slightly higher than what is being offered at many retailers that have job openings posted in my area. ASHP has launched PharmTech Ready, a resource that can help bridge the professional development and training gaps that were also identified as drivers of the current nationwide shortage of pharmacy technicians. The adaptable program features over 160 hours of entry- and advanced-level content on more than 70 topics and includes supplemental materials that will allow healthcare organizations to leverage their sites for experiential training. In several of the pharmacies I have been at recently, besides pay increases they are implementing processes to manage workload, including requiring appointments for vaccines, implementing central fill for chronic prescription management, and establishing operational efficiencies that also address forthcoming Drug Supply Chain Security Act (DSCSA) requirements.

Hopefully, these measures will bring some relief in the coming months. Speaking of coming months, I hope you have the 2022 ASAP Midyear Conference, September 14–16 at the Omni Parker House in Boston on your calendar. The program lineup looks great, and that's a beautiful time of the year to be in Boston. And by then some of the travel kinks may be worked out of the system. I'll be there — will you? **CT**

Marsha K. Millonig, B.Pharm., M.B.A., is president and CEO of Catalyst Enterprises, LLC, and an associate fellow at the University of Minnesota College of Pharmacy Center for Leading Healthcare Change. The author can be reached at mmillonig@catalystenterprises.net.