

# Combining pharmacy and law provides twice the career options

*Proud of both professions, but most fond of pharmacy*



By Ilisa B.G. Bernstein, PharmD, JD

For many years, when faced with a blank line on a form or application asking for "Occupation," I would stop and consider how best to fill it in. Although I knew that the answer was pharmacist-lawyer, I wondered if people would be confused by that title. Would they think I could not decide what professional course to take? Would they wonder whether I practiced law behind the raised counter in a community pharmacy and counseled clients on legal matters between counseling patients on medications? Would they think that I was such a bad pharmacist that I had to go to law school to defend my own liability lawsuits?

I no longer worry about such questions and how to fill in the blank. I have had both degrees for so long now that I can confidently explain to people what I do, why I pursued both educational pathways, how I use my pharmacy knowledge and legal knowledge in the course of my day, how other people have done the same, and what opportunities are available for pharmacist-lawyers.

Although my educational path was long, I feel fortunate to be able to say that every day, I am able to apply my pharmacy skills and the knowledge I learned in pharmacy school along with the legal skills and knowledge I acquired in law school. Because I had a particular interest in the regulatory and legal aspects of pharmaceuticals, I knew early on in pharmacy school that I wanted to go to law school at some point. What I learned in my introductory course on pharmacy law did not teach me everything I wanted to know.

## Get a foot in the door

Like many pharmacists who go on to earn additional professional degrees, I worked for several years before going to law school. I graduated from the University of Michigan College of Pharmacy with a PharmD and completed an American Society of Health-System Pharmacists-accredited residency at the National Institutes of Health, specializing in clinical and research

pharmacokinetics. I then accepted a position at FDA, reviewing and evaluating the clinical pharmacokinetic aspects of investigational drugs and drugs submitted for marketing approval. This position gave me a deep insight into and understanding of the clinical, scientific, and regulatory characteristics of the research, development, and approval process for pharmaceuticals. It also gave me a foot in the door at FDA, which was where I ultimately saw myself applying the combined skills of law and pharmacy.

Four years out of pharmacy school, I decided that it was time to start my legal education. By then, I was enjoying working at FDA and did not want to give up a steady salary, so I decided to go to law school at night and continue working full-time at FDA during the day. Fortunately, in the Washington, D.C., area, there are many law schools that offer evening programs. The standard daytime JD takes 3 years. In most evening programs, however, it takes 4 years to get a JD, and that includes taking classes for two summer semesters.

## On both sides of the table

Around the same time that I started law school at the American University Washington College of Law, an opportunity came up for me to work as a policy analyst in the FDA commissioner's office. The department was looking for someone who had a good knowledge of the drug approval process to help develop new initiatives to speed the approval of new drugs. The office personnel knew that I was just about to start law school and did not know a contract from a tort, but they figured I would learn what I needed along the way on the job, as well as in law school. In fact, by my third year in the JD program, when I began to begin specializing in health law and regulatory (administrative) law, FDA helped pay for several classes.

When I graduated from law school, I was promoted to senior science policy advisor. I was given more responsibilities, more independence, and slightly higher pay. I stayed in this position for 7 years and was in charge of many exciting projects,

including the new Drug Facts labeling initiative, which helped make the content and format of OTC drug labeling easier to read and easier to understand; direct-to-consumer promotion policies; patient education initiatives; regulation of tobacco and cigarettes; and labeling and regulation of dietary supplements.

I have since taken a job at Pfizer, where I am the senior associate director of the company's FDA Regulatory Liaison Office. I now am sitting on the "other side of the table" and evaluate FDA's policies and regulations determining how Pfizer must adapt or modify internal approaches to comply with regulatory and legal requirements.

### Two kinds of education

Pharmacy school and law school have many similarities, but, for the most part, they are very different.

From my experience in pharmacy school, the first two years are a lot of didactic learning and memorizing. In the third and fourth years, the principles learned from the didactic curriculum are applied to individual clinical and patient situations. In law school, although there is some didactic learning, the legal principles are applied to situations from early on in the curriculum. Both schools have opportunities for clinical, hands-on learning. In fact, in law school, the hands-on interacting with clients is called a clinic.

Finally, both schools have an intensive examination that you must pass before you can practice in a particular state. For pharmacy, it is the NAPLEX (in most states); in the legal profession, it is the state's bar exam. I must admit, however, that the bar

application process and examination were considerably more rigorous than the NAPLEX and Michigan pharmacy law exam.

There are many pharmacist-lawyers throughout the United States. Many have traditional law practices and specialize in pharmacy law or health law issues. Some pharmacist-lawyers teach pharmacy law, food and drug law, and pharmacy administration. A few even run pharmacy schools. There are pharmacist-lawyers who work for professional and trade associations, pharmaceutical companies, pharmacy-oriented insurance companies, pharmacies, PBMs, consulting firms, state and federal regulatory agencies (including boards of pharmacy), and a host of other diverse employers.

In fact, the American Society for Pharmacy Law ([www.aspl.org](http://www.aspl.org)) is an organization for pharmacy or law students, pharmacists, and pharmacist-lawyers that provides information and educational sessions for persons interested in pharmacy law issues.

The dual degrees of pharmacy and law have served me well. It is an interesting combination that provides significant opportunity for unique and satisfying career options. Although I am proud to say that I am a member of both the pharmacy and legal professions, when it comes time to fill in the blank with "pharmacist-lawyer," it is the "pharmacist" part of me that comes first and of which I am most proud.

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