

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON SCHOOL OF PHARMACY STUDENT WRITING CLUB:

# Pharmacy Leader Spotlight: Holly Altenberger

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**H**olly Altenberger, PharmD, is the director of O'Connell Pharmacy in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, an independent pharmacy with two locations. In addition to dispensing prescriptions at its retail location, the pharmacy also offers services such as immunizations, healthcare screenings, and compliance programs. At the separate long-term care (LTC) pharmacy location, compliance packaging services are provided to assisted living and skilled nursing facilities. As the Director of Pharmacy, Altenberger oversees the day-to-day operations of both the retail and LTC pharmacies. She is dedicated to providing exceptional patient care, while improving efficiency and lowering error rates at both O'Connell Pharmacy locations.

Altenberger attended Edgewood College and graduated with a bachelor's degree in biology and a minor in chemistry. While completing these degrees, she worked part-time at LensCrafters as an optician. She was a part-time supervisor in her sophomore year of college and, after numerous promotions, held a leadership position at the store management level upon graduation. These positions allowed her to develop valuable leadership skills, in addition to learning about human resources management. Despite appreciating all that she learned at LensCrafters, Altenberger decided she wanted to pursue a career in pharmacy approximately two years after she graduated from Edgewood College. This is when she became a student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Pharmacy. During pharmacy school, Altenberger worked as a pharmacy technician and completed an internship at Walmart Pharmacy. She loved the atmosphere of retail pharmacy, and was able to obtain even more experience during her Advanced Pharmacy Practice Experience (APPE)

rotations in her fourth year of pharmacy school. Notably, she had the opportunity to complete one of her eight-week rotations at O'Connell Pharmacy. Following graduation from pharmacy school, Altenberger was hired as a staff pharmacist at O'Connell Pharmacy. Within the first year of her employment, the owner, Mark O'Connell, RPh, began to decrease his hours as he prepared for retirement. Soon after, she became Store Manager at the LTC pharmacy location. She held this role for roughly four years until she was promoted to her current position as the Director of Pharmacy.

## Mentor

When asked who has played an influential role in her career, Altenberger was quick to name Mark O'Connell, who owned the pharmacy from 1987 until last May, when he passed. Altenberger says that she had an amazing opportunity to learn directly from him, as there was a good portion of time when it was just her and O'Connell working together. She credits O'Connell with teaching her how to be a calm and respectable leader, seeing patients as people first. Mark O'Connell had the respect of his employees and cared for them like family. Altenberger, having had experience mostly in the corporate world, found O'Connell's leadership style inspiring. Today, she strives to demonstrate her compassion to both her employees and her patients.

## Accomplishments

Altenberger says her greatest professional achievement is helping to create an environment where all individuals, employees and patients alike, enjoy their interaction with the pharmacy. She describes an atmosphere that is pleasant yet productive, accurate, and noble. Altenberger makes a great effort to ensure that the

pharmacy encourages staff to grow and to do it at their own pace. For instance, she shares that one of her technicians joined the pharmacy while in high school and has, since then, taken on a role as their current project manager. Under her leadership, the pharmacy evolves together, and her team is ready to take on any challenges even if it requires breaking new ground.

Early in her career, Altenberger would often fail to keep what she describes as a "knee-jerk overdrive mode" at bay when plans would go awry. Her immediate response to any issues that arose at the pharmacy was to step in and try to fix everything. However, she has learned over time that there is more harm than benefit done by a knee-jerk reaction, and that her response directly impacts her team morale. Hence, she stresses the importance of being a calm and consistent leader, a lesson carried forward from Mark O'Connell.

Outside of the pharmacy, Altenberger says her greatest personal achievement is having her three kids and trying her best to work through daily hurdles. She values being a part of their growth and having the ability to take on an active role in their lives. Altenberger appreciates the great work-life balance and flexibility that independent pharmacies offer. This enables her and her staff to prioritize family and relations and build a community together with their children.

## Concerns Today

As the world of pharmacy practice continues to progress, Altenberger shares her growing concern for the future of independent pharmacies. With changes in reimbursement structure and the cost of goods increasing, independent pharmacies are struggling to continue providing quality care and will continue to be forced into focusing on staying afloat, rather than the incredible services pharmacists are equipped

to provide.

In the next 10 years, Altenberger hopes to see pharmacy practice evolve to provide more clinical services. In recent years, the clinical services at O'Connell Pharmacy have been expanding to accommodate population needs. For example, they now offer COVID-19 testing services in response to the pandemic. Altenberger hopes to continue to see independent pharmacies demonstrating their value and role in society, specifically the ability to provide services that other providers may not be able to. Independent pharmacies are uniquely positioned to provide patients in need with extra resources, as these pharmacists tend to have more time to dedicate to each individual patient.

Altenberger shares that her top priorities today are to continue to expand the clinical services O'Connell Pharmacy offers, while ensuring she retains the necessary staff. She is excited to implement more testing services in the coming year. She is close to this initiative, since she serves on the Pharmacy Society of Wisconsin's (PSW) Seniorcare and LTC Advisory Committee. However, she recognizes that new services would not be possible without the employees to implement them. Altenberger will continue to dedicate her time to showing her appreciation for her staff and allowing them to work towards a fulfilling career in pharmacy.

## Advice for Future Leaders

To future leaders, Altenberger emphasizes the importance of keeping



an open mind and the value of listening to others. As leaders, it is easy to fall victim to a natural rhythm of seeking out problems, and then immediately finding quick solutions to fix them. However, this underestimates the value of simply sitting down and hearing the perspectives of those directly impacted and the insights they have to offer. Altenberger emphasizes the importance of perpetually adapting to meet the requirements of the industry and employees. She thanks PSW for its support along the way, and for broadening her horizons by enabling her to sit on the LTC board and the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion committee.

A major lesson adopted from her previous employment at LensCrafters that she carries forward to this day is that a successful leader is one who can step away

from their role and still have a seamless operation. To achieve this, leaders must learn the benefit of letting go of control and being able to step back when appropriate. Although Altenberger would no doubt have benefited from learning all these lessons earlier in her life, she is much more appreciative knowing that she gained them through experience over time. A final piece of advice is to always be the best that you can by continuously changing and evolving.

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