Is a postgraduate year 2 residency necessary to practice in ambulatory care?

You are getting ready to graduate from your postgraduate year 1 (PGY1) pharmacy residency, with plans to pursue a career in ambulatory care. You have gained experience and developed an interest in a variety of ambulatory care practice settings, spending one-on-one time with patients, providing population management, and educating providers, patients, and students. You are motivated to start looking for job opportunities. Then you ask yourself, “Do I need a PGY2 residency in ambulatory care?”

Postgraduate year 2 (PGY2) pharmacy residency programs offer organized training in specific areas of pharmacy. The value and justification of specialty-trained clinical pharmacists have been described elsewhere. While it is possible for pharmacists without PGY2 training to acquire specialty positions, the demand for PGY2 residency-trained pharmacists has been increasing. To meet this demand, PGY2 ambulatory care residency positions have more than doubled in the last five years, surpassing the increase in PGY2 applicants enrolled in the ASHP Residency Matching Program administered by National Matching Services. The growth in available PGY2 ambulatory care positions makes this training a viable option for more PGY1-trained pharmacists. Nevertheless, the decision to enter into an additional year of residency training is a very personal one that should take into account many factors. The following questions are meant as a guide to help you decide your best path.

How prepared are you for independent practice in ambulatory care? To determine your personal preparedness, exercise self-reflection and seek insights from trusted pharmacy advisers currently working in an environment aligned with your goals. Identify specific skills needing further development, and consider whether growth can be best gained through a PGY2 learning environment or through on-the-job training. Skills to consider include the ability to independently make clinical decisions in the context of common chronic diseases and preventive healthcare; procure team “buy-in” for pharmacy services; interact confidently in interprofessional situations; identify needs for, and create opportunities to implement, quality improvement; develop learning opportunities that offer learners exposure to the many facets of ambulatory care; and coordinate care for medically complex patients.

If you feel you have a lot to learn or that the skills you would like to gain would be best cultivated in an environment created for learning, you may choose to pursue a PGY2 ambulatory care residency. Critically evaluate your PGY2 residency options for alignment with your goals. If you have identified specific skills for improvement, consider PGY2 residencies that provide sufficient training time in these areas. Research the significant differences in residency curricula to help identify the strengths and weaknesses of each program.

Another option is to accept an ambulatory care position that provides adequate training. Key questions to ask during the interview process include whether there is a network of well-established ambulatory care pharmacists who are willing to serve as mentors and whether the employer has established competencies and proficiencies along with a system for providing routine feedback. Be careful to avoid situations that quell the desire to refine your skills as an ambulatory care pharmacist. Seek employment with an organization that has a culture of learning and self-development to aid in propelling you to the next level of proficiency in any environment; this may include protected project time, financial support for continuing education, and clear mentorship and feedback mechanisms.

Where do you want to live and work as an ambulatory care pharmacist? If there are particular areas of the country where you would prefer to live, identify ambulatory care pharmacists who work in those locations. Contact them and ask questions about what qualifications...
are expected; regional differences in expectations can be driven by many factors, including the presence or absence of PGY2 residency programs and the degree of saturation of the pharmacy job market.

Strategies for identifying ambulatory care pharmacists in a desired location include consulting the ASHP residency directory, which lists PGY1 and PGY2 program directors; contacting potential employers (e.g., a health system’s director of pharmacy or clinical coordinator); capitalizing on networking opportunities at regional and national conferences; and seeking input and direction from local mentors who have connections.

A more direct way to gain information to better understand your options is to look for both PGY2 residencies and nonresidency employment during the PGY1 residency year. This will help discern your personal list of pros and cons for both career paths. The best time to explore both options without local and regional restrictions is the Personnel Placement Service recruitment event held in conjunction with the ASHP Midyear Clinical Meeting. Consider narrowing and communicating your choices by February so as not to strain relationships with PGY2 residency program directors or potential employers.

What role would you like to play in the design and implementation of new or expanded pharmacy services? Established ambulatory care pharmacy services have various hiring requirements, and there may be opportunities for PGY1 residency graduates with training in ambulatory care to become part of the team. If you are looking for a more independent practice or to launch services in a new location, it is prudent to have experience in initiating and sustaining pharmacy services. Skills and experiences such as obtaining buy-in, writing a business plan, implementing services, coordinating with the healthcare team, advocating for pharmacists’ unique role, developing growth plans, identifying areas for quality improvement, and meeting metrics often come with completion of a PGY2 residency in ambulatory care, though opportunities to develop these skills vary by program. It is important to note that a PGY2 residency is not required in order to develop these skills; it simply provides an opportunity to gain these skills earlier in your career.

There is a trend toward managers preferring to hire PGY2 residency–trained specialty pharmacists. Job descriptions generally include preferred and required attributes. Documented trends indicate a preference for PGY2 training or a minimum number of years of specialized experience in hiring for specialty pharmacy positions. Therefore, completing a PGY2 residency may decrease the time it takes to attain your ideal position.

What responsibilities would you like included in your job description, and how much time would you like to devote to each of these functions? Completion of a PGY2 ambulatory care residency program often expands a pharmacist’s early-career job opportunities. Advantages conferred by the residency experience, as compared with on-the-job training, may include more robust teaching responsibilities and increased involvement in quality improvement, organizational decision-making, and expansion of pharmacy services. If a diversity of responsibilities is appealing to you, consider a PGY2 residency that will position you well for such situations. Alternatively, if you envision an expanded role later in your career but do not currently desire the complexities of such a position, you can gain valuable experience throughout your career that can prepare you for leadership roles in the future.

To what degree does your preferred career path involve teaching students and residents in ambulatory care? Both PGY1 and PGY2 residency–trained pharmacists teach and precept pharmacy students. The Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education’s 2016 standards require that individual schools of pharmacy create criteria for preceptors of both introductory and advanced pharmacy practice experiences. Most commonly, only pharmacy licensure (not a specific level of residency training) is required.

On completion of a PGY1 residency, you are prepared to precept students and, per ASHP standards, may be the primary preceptor for PGY1 residents after one year of postresidency practice. During the first postresidency year, you may have the title preceptor-in-training, which means you are assigned a precepting coach and have a documented development plan. In order to be a primary preceptor for PGY2 ambulatory care residents, a pharmacist with PGY1 training must demonstrate expertise in ambulatory care and have a minimum of three years of practice in an outpatient environment.

On completion of a PGY2 ambulatory care program, a pharmacist is qualified to train students and may independently precept PGY1 residents after six months. To serve as a primary preceptor for PGY2 residents, you must first complete one additional year of pharmacy practice in ambulatory care.

If you plan to become a residency program director, the requirements are even more specific, including board certification and longer periods of pharmacy practice experience.

Will PGY2 residency training affect my salary? Currently there is no literature evaluating the difference in the career earning potential between PGY1-only and PGY2-trained pharmacists. As a PGY2 resident, you will incur an additional one-year period of relatively low salary. However, additional training or certifications gained during that year can increase opportunities for salary negotiation. Both PGY2- and PGY1-trained residents meet the minimum experiential requirements to sit for the examination leading to board certification in ambulatory care pharmacy (i.e., two years of practice after graduation from pharmacy
school, with at least 50% of that time spent in ambulatory care activities). To be eligible to sit for the board certification examination, pharmacists with only PGY1 training are required to have an additional year of ambulatory care practice experience; those with PGY2 training in ambulatory care may sit for the examination upon residency completion. See the Board of Pharmacy Specialties (BPS) website (www.bpsweb.org) for the most up-to-date rules.

The 2015 BPS annual report shows a 60% pass rate for pharmacists taking the ambulatory care board certification examination. BPS has not published specific information on examination pass rates for PGY1- and PGY2-trained pharmacists. While board certification can help with salary negotiation and preferred-job requirements, it is important to note the lack of strong evidence to support the use of scores on written certification examinations as predictors of preparedness for clinical practice or competence.

Depending on your answers to the above questions, PGY2 training may provide increased job satisfaction and diversity of experience, especially earlier in your career. Consider whether foregoing higher earnings during the PGY2 residency year is worth the opportunity for additional learning experiences and potential increased job satisfaction. Only you can answer these questions.

**Closing notes.** The choice to complete a PGY2 residency in ambulatory care is a very personal decision that should take into account many factors, not the least of which are preferred future work location, family considerations, and professional goals. The most important point to remember is that there is no right or wrong answer. There are a multitude of successful ambulatory care pharmacists representing a variety of training backgrounds.


Andrea R. Corona, Pharm.D., BCACP, CDE Providence St. Peter Family Medicine Olympia, WA andrea.corona@providence.org

Amanda Bitterman, Pharm.D. Providence Hawks Prairie Family Medicine Lacey, WA

The authors have declared no potential conflicts of interest.

DOI 10.2146/ajhp151067