



# The Conscience of a Pharmacist

*Essays on vision  
and leadership  
for a profession*

*William A. Zellmer*

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*To Charlene, Martin, and Katherine*



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# Foreword

Rainer Maria Rilke, in a small volume titled *Letters to a Young Poet*, advised a young correspondent “to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the *questions themselves* . . . Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answers.”

This collection of essays speaks to much that is unsolved in our hearts as pharmacists. The messages here are based on a deep love of the profession and a profound belief that individual pharmacists, in all practice settings, have it within their power to transform the profession. They appeal directly to the conscience of the individual pharmacist. Zellmer reminds us that the pharmacy practitioner is the atom — the irreducible element — of pharmacy practice. (Pharmacists — not corporations — practice pharmacy.) The choices we make as individual pharmacists ultimately chart the course of the profession.

These pages, then, are intended for all those individuals who make up the fabric of our profession — individual practitioners, pharmacy educators, pharmacy technicians, and all our young colleagues-in-training (students, interns, and residents).

For many readers, this will be at least the second reading of these pieces. We read them when they first appeared in *AJHP*, and we came to depend on them to help us understand the complex (and perplexing) realities of the pharmacy environment. Having just re-read this entire set of essays, I am struck by the fact that many of the issues we struggled with 10 years ago, or even 25 years ago, are still with us. During that period the context in which we have examined the issues has continually changed, but the fundamental issues, and related questions, have remained fairly constant. For example, we still search for agreement on our professional purpose and responsibility. We still seek understanding by others of the value of the services we provide. And we still debate how best to unite our voices as pharmacists. Things that are unsolved in our hearts.

Continued growth and development in pharmacy will require that we all engage in honest reflection and self-criticism on behalf of the profession. These essays were written, I believe, to help us in that process. But expansion of our vision and development of our leadership potential are the real goals of this collection. Vision requires special insights and a broad perspective. A patient reading of this volume, or even of selected sections, will lead most of us to deeper insights concerning the soul of pharmacy, and will help us see more clearly where pharmacy fits in the broad landscape of health care.

Preparation for leadership begins with personal reflection and soul-searching. It requires the development of clear vision. And it requires discipline and patience. Among the readers of these pages will no doubt be many pharmacists who are preparing themselves to lead — individuals who are taking the trouble to analyze the complex issues facing pharmacy, who are learning how to build



the appropriate relationships with groups outside the profession, and who are listening carefully to people who may be wiser than they are. Those are the individuals who will profit most from this book.

Not all of us in pharmacy will likely be as patient with all that is unsolved in our hearts as Rilke advises, but there is no doubt great wisdom in his advice to *love* the questions, and to *live* the questions. Rather than giving in to frustration or cynicism over the issues we face, perhaps we should befriend them — make them our *own* questions, think about them from different perspectives, incorporate them into our daily discourse with colleagues, allow them to become a part of our subconscious thought. If you and I live the questions in this way, no doubt some of us will live along some day into the answers.

I think that's what Bill Zellmer has tried to inspire us to do.

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# Introduction

At some point in our individual journeys as pharmacists, we become aware of the immense gap between the potential and the actual performance of pharmacy as a health profession. For some pharmacists, this is a fleeting cognizance with a significance so troubling that it is denied and buried forever. Other common reactions include resignation, frustration, cynicism, and escape. The most constructive response, I believe, is dedication to reform of the profession, in whatever sphere of influence a pharmacist has.

A spirit of reform shaped the essays in this book, which were first published as editorials in the *American Journal of Health-System Pharmacy (AJHP)*. I believe that the editorials selected for this book — half of them written in the 1990s, the rest earlier<sup>a</sup> — are still relevant to the state of pharmacy today. In some cases, the essays offer historical perspective on particular choices the profession has made, such as the adoption of the Pharm.D. degree education as the minimum for all new practitioners. I hope that this book will attract and arouse new readers — the practitioners, educators, residents, and students who have not been exposed to the pharmacy literature of the past twenty years — and incite them to make pharmacy a better profession.

As I organized these pieces into logical groupings for this book, they seemed to align naturally with the following tactics for shifting pharmacy's focus from handling products to caring for patients:

- Foster understanding of pharmacy's situation by learning from history and moving beyond blind acceptance of the status quo.
- Impel practitioners to make a commitment to improve their profession.
- Motivate others (e.g., patients, physicians, health administrators, public officials) to demand a level of performance by pharmacists that is consistent with their education.
- Encourage those who wield power in the profession to focus their resources on constructive changes.
- Capitalize on special opportunities (e.g., the concern about drug costs or preventable adverse drug events) to advance the cause of reform.
- Encourage practitioners to work collectively on changing pharmacy through professional organizations.
- Celebrate the leadership of those who have contributed significantly to the advancement of the profession.

Many of the essays deal with hospital pharmacy, and some discuss how the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP) has attempted to influence practice. These pieces, which concentrate on a specific area of practice, are not incompatible with the broad goal of reforming pharmacy practice as a whole. It is quite common for advancements in one sector of pharmacy to help the profession at large move forward.

Pharmacists are not just pharmacists. We are participants in the evolution of civilization. We seek meaning and fulfillment in our lives. We have concerns about the world we live in and about the future. A few essays reflect these dimensions of pharmacists.

Inherent in the practice of a profession is dominant guidance by *conscience*, which the *American Heritage Dictionary* defines as “the awareness of a moral or ethical aspect to one’s conduct together with the urge to prefer right over wrong.” I hope that the thoughts in this anthology will expand the number of pharmacists who, out of conscience, nurture a passion for putting our profession on the side of right over wrong in caring for those who need our knowledge, skills, and wisdom.

*<sup>a</sup>The date of first publication appears after the title of each essay in this book.*

## Acknowledgement

I thank the members of ASHP for fostering an environment that values analysis, insight, free expression, and fresh approaches to old problems. In that environment, early editors of *AJHP*, Donald E. Francke and George P. Provost, established a strong tradition of clear thinking and bold writing about a wide range of professional issues. That tradition helped incubate the essays in this book.

I thank all those who have given me constructive feedback on my writing over the years, especially Joseph A. Oddis and C. Richard Talley, and those who have always been a reliable source of advice on the finer points of the written word, particularly Wende B. Mack and Nancy Tarleton Landis. I appreciate the encouragement of colleagues who suggested that I publish this collection of editorials, including Henri R. Manasse, Jr., C. Richard Talley, T. Donald Rucker, and Max D. Ray.

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