



PHARM CIRCLE

Connecting stories from Memorial's PharmD for Working Professionals Program

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From the Dean's Desk

Dr. Shawn Bugden

Since our last issue, we welcomed the final cohort of pharmacists to the program. During their on-campus visit in September, they met instructors, made connections with peers, and had informative discussions about pharmacy practice. It was a great way for them to have in-person interactions and kick start the program.



Earlier this year, we reached 100 graduates during Memorial University's centennial year. In this issue, we acknowledge that milestone with gratitude and balloons.

We continue to profile valued members of the Working Professionals Program pharmacy. The instructor spotlight section features Dr. Mike Chong who teaches the evidence-based practice course during the winter semester. He encourages students to feel curious about research evidence and appreciate the connections to pharmacy practice. We also catch up with program alumnus, Dr. Vanessa Bennett. She currently practices in the area of anticoagulation management and credits the PharmD program for giving her the curiosity and confidence to explore a specialized field. The student spotlight section shares stories of five students who are working hard to obtain their PharmD and using the knowledge and skills they gain towards expanding services and providing optimal patient care.

The happy happenings section celebrates the recipients from the School of Pharmacy awards night and acknowledges the students who received their PharmD degree at Fall 2025 convocation. The School of Pharmacy is also grateful to acknowledge receipt of a three-year grant from the International Grenfell Association that will help fund pharmacy student placements in under-resourced regions in Newfoundland and Labrador.

As 2025 comes to an end, we wish you a safe and happy Christmas season.

We have a diverse group of faculty, external content authors, and instructional designers who work together to make this program a success. We will share their profiles in every issue.

Instructor Spotlight

Dr. Mike Chong



Mike Chong is a course instructor at the School of Pharmacy. He completed his pharmacy degree at the University of Toronto and practiced as a community pharmacist in Ontario. While he always liked teaching, being a lab facilitator and a preceptor further sparked his interest in health professional education. He went on to complete a Master of Education with research focusing on the history of experiential education.

In 2017, Mike joined the School of Pharmacy at Memorial University as a Drug Information Pharmacist. In this role, he taught in undergraduate pharmacy practice courses and was a preceptor to pharmacy residents and PharmD students at the Drug Information Centre.

The right timing, circumstances, and interests led him to pursue a PhD in pharmacy education at Memorial, exploring relationships between curriculum, pedagogy, and practice. More recently, he ventured into neurodiversity and housing research, working as a knowledge translation specialist. This has expanded his perspective on accessibility and inclusive practices that he brings back into pharmacy education.

Mike began teaching the evidence-based practice course (PHAR 4903) in the PharmD for Working Professionals Program three years ago. In this course, he aims to make reading and understanding academic literature more approachable. Each year, he tries to select articles that are new and exciting while aligning with the class's interests and their areas of practice. He encourages students to feel curious about research evidence and appreciate the connections to pharmacy practice. Students really enjoy his teaching style and value learning about evidence-based medicine.

With a passion for pharmacy history, Mike joined the Newfoundland and Labrador Pharmacy Museum Board of Directors in 2019 and continues to work there to keep the stories and artifacts of the profession alive in the province. He's currently working on revamping the museum website and creating new online exhibits.

Beyond pharmacy, Mike is an avid runner and the half-marathon is his favourite race distance. He enjoys travelling for races as a wonderful way to visit cities and go sightseeing without worrying about vehicle traffic. This year, he ran races in Vancouver and Berlin. In 2026, he's considering running a half-marathon in Brazil or New Zealand.

Although life has now taken him to Ottawa, he's made it a tradition to come back to St. John's to visit friends and colleagues. On these trips he can often be found at a local café, concert, or cocktail bar!

Celebrating Milestones

Reaching 100 Graduates During Memorial's Centennial Year



Memorial University launched the PharmD for Working Professionals Program in 2018 as a response to the changing pharmacy landscape in Canada.

Thirty-six students began the program during its inaugural year. Many pharmacists from across Canada completed their PharmD degree since then.

During Spring 2025 convocation, the program witnessed its 100th graduate cross the ceremonial stage. Reaching 100 graduates during Memorial's 100th anniversary is a fitting milestone. It was not planned, but it is a celebratory coincidence worth acknowledging.

Photo: Dr. Tiffany Lee (Program Director), Lisa Little (Experiential Learning Coordinator), and Christa McGrath (Program Coordinator) raise balloons to celebrate 100 graduates during Memorial's 100th anniversary year

Welcoming the 2025 Cohort

This past September (2025), the program admitted 30 students into its final cohort. As the program enters its sunset phase, there is no shortage of excitement for what the future holds for this group.

Meeting in person was one of their highlights. The on-campus course gave them the opportunity to interact with each other and engage in meaningful discussions and healthy debates. The balance of didactic teaching and hands-on learning was invaluable to them.

Forming in-person connections was a great way to kickstart their PharmD journey. It provided an opportunity for them to collaborate with pharmacists from across the country, while learning from their instructors and classmates in tandem.

Photo: The 2025 cohort during their visit to campus in September to complete Clinical Skills I, re-creating a photo from the first cohort in 2018





Catching up with program alumnus:

Dr. Vanessa Bennett
(PharmD, 2022)

Vanessa was drawn to a career in health care early on, where she could put her love of science and studying to good use. Voted 'most likely to die studying' by her high school classmates, she was destined to be a lifelong learner.

Drawn to healthcare

During her secondary and post-secondary school years, Vanessa spent several summers working within the Department of Health and Community Services doing administrative tasks in the MCP and Pharmaceutical Services division. There, she realized that the pharmacist's work extended beyond the dispensary.

After completing a biochemistry degree in 2012, Vanessa knew a research or laboratory-based career was not for her. She was drawn to a patient-facing role in healthcare. She wanted to interact with people and give back to her community while maintaining a good work-life balance. Recalling the diverse career paths available to pharmacists, her interest in pharmacy was solidified. She earned her Bachelor of Pharmacy degree from Memorial University in 2016 and completed her PharmD degree in 2022.

From community to hospital

After completing her first pharmacy degree, Vanessa worked as a community pharmacist. Though she enjoyed it, she was more drawn to hospital pharmacy. She enrolled in the Working Professionals Program because she felt having a PharmD would help advance her career, regardless of the practice setting.

Ironically, when she began the program in 2019, she had just accepted a pharmacist position in hospital. She quickly realized the importance of expanding her therapeutic

knowledge as hospital practice was foreign to her. Beginning a new job and returning to university at the same time was intimidating, but the timing turned out to be a great combination of classroom and experiential knowledge for Vanessa.

Specializing in a field

Vanessa never envisioned herself as a specialist within the pharmacy profession. But that all changed after spending five years in Thrombosis Services where anticoagulation management is a therapeutic focus. After her predecessor moved into a new position in July 2025, Vanessa became the new clinic lead at the Newfoundland and Labrador Health Services (NLHS) Adult Outpatient Anticoagulation Management Service. She now operates out of the newly opened Unity Health Centre, also known as the Ambulatory Health Hub, in the east end of St. John's.

Pharmacist-led anticoagulation management and anticoagulation stewardship is a growing field and is gaining traction because of its positive clinical outcomes for patients. Vanessa finds this field of work extremely rewarding. Providing this type of service allows her to practice to her fullest potential, exercising her full scope of practice as a pharmacist in Newfoundland & Labrador.

The PharmD benefit

Anticoagulation management held Vanessa's attention for over five years. She believes completing her PharmD gave

her the curiosity and confidence to explore this specialized field. It also improved her direct patient care skills, particularly in physical assessment, which is an important component of a comprehensive assessment in her practice.

She credits her networking experiences throughout the Working Professionals Program with sparking her interest in provincial pharmacy advocacy efforts. Interacting with her peers from across the country highlighted gaps in the pharmacist's scope of practice in her province that she hoped could be narrowed through advocacy work.

Completing her clinical rotations in the Working Professionals Program were invaluable. She completed her first rotation in the community IV program which was largely ambulatory infectious disease. Her preceptors were a wealth of knowledge, helping grow her antimicrobial stewardship skills. Her second rotation was completed in Internal Medicine. Though an intimidating rotation at the start, her preceptor expertly guided her throughout. It was her first inpatient hospital experience and it exposed her to the pharmacist's role in caring for medically complex patients within a collaborative team. The rotation ultimately prepared her to take on new inpatient clinical roles later, such as in cardiovascular critical care.

In her current practice, she stays up to date on the newest evidence-based therapies by reading studies and guidelines and participating in a monthly journal club with hospital pharmacists across the province. Cementing her critical appraisal skills during the Working Professionals Program gave her more confidence when applying the primary literature to her patients and making informed clinical decisions with the best available evidence.

Opportunities galore

Expanding on her interest in the area of anticoagulation management, Vanessa attended the International Society of Thrombosis and Hemostasis Conference in Montreal in 2023 where she networked with pharmacist and physician colleagues from all over the world. She also delivers continuing education events on anticoagulation management to local pharmacy groups and sits on the Anticoagulation Stewardship Committee, reviewing and revising hospital-based protocols with the best available evidence.

Down the road, she hopes to expand the ambulatory Anticoagulation Management Service into an inpatient clinical service and maximize its reach so that patients all over the province have access to this specialized care. She

plans to continue her advocacy work with the provincial pharmacist's association and her committee work within the provincial health authority to expand the role of pharmacists and advocate for the specialized needs of unionized hospital pharmacists.

Vanessa is excited about the potential within the pharmacy profession. She says, "Our ability to practice to the level of our education and exercise our professional autonomy has grown exponentially and that makes me both proud of our profession and fulfilled in my career."

Sharing advice

Vanessa encourages students to make connections and network with peers. This was instrumental for her when she was in the program and even after she graduated. Some of her greatest friendships were formed in pharmacy school and she learned a lot of great lessons from her peers. She encourages students to join societies of interest, engage with provincial and national advocacy bodies, and push for change when there is a need that aligns with the core of the pharmacist's practice.

A nod to Seinfeld

Vanessa enjoys spending most of her downtime with her dog, Larry David. A fan of the TV show, Seinfeld, Vanessa couldn't help but name her Golden Retriever dog after the show's creator. So, when she is not doing pharmacy-related things, she is with Larry and living life to the fullest.



The dashing Larry David striking a pose on a hiking trail

Students in the Spotlight

We like to celebrate our students and will share student profiles in every issue.

2021 Cohort

Jennifer Whyte

Jen grew up in northern Manitoba and credits her high school chemistry and biology teachers for her interest in science. She graduated with a bachelor of science in pharmacy from the University of Manitoba in 2008.

After graduation, Jen moved to Pine Falls and began her career as a community pharmacist. In 2013, she moved to Reston to pursue a business opportunity with her partner. In 2014, she purchased Reston Drugs and then expanded in 2016 with the acquisition of another pharmacy in Virden.

Moving from her previous busy practice in Pine Falls to the small, sleepy town of Reston was a big change. Never had she worked with such lovely people. This allowed her the time to interact with patients and get to know their needs in a more personable environment. She discovered over time that her true passion was in patient care, not business.

In 2020, with the chaos of the pandemic in full swing and the challenges it presented to business owners, Jen explored PharmD programs. She chose Memorial for two reasons: (1) Newfoundland was the only Canadian province she hadn't visited; and (2) Dr. Bugden was the Dean, and she thought he was pretty darn cool when he worked at the University of Manitoba, so she presumed it must be a good program.

What she found when she started the program in 2021 was a great learning environment. Interacting with fellow pharmacists was refreshing. Learning to use a scientific calculator again was



interesting, though she still thinks YouTube is an invaluable learning tool for adults. She was incredibly grateful for the teaching staff, saying “the professors and instructors are some of the most warm, caring, and passionate pharmacy people you’ll ever meet and their accents are a bonus.”

Jen took a little longer to complete the program, mostly due to challenges of finding a replacement at work when it was time for her to do the six-week clinical rotations. Her first rotation was an incredible learning experience in the ICU. She is now completing her final placement in a primary care clinic, creating her role and integrating herself within a busy team of physicians, nurses, nurse practitioners, and admin staff.

Being a pharmacist owner and student simultaneously, Jen repeated the affirmation ‘you can do hard things’. This program encouraged her to seek new experiences and learn who she is. In 2024, she completed the Mantario, a grueling 65 km-ish back-country trail in the Canadian Shield, and discovered her love for hiking. She travelled to Trinidad with the Canadian Sea Turtle Network in 2025 to learn and work with leatherback turtles. She doesn't know where life or her profession will take her in the next few years, but is enjoying the ride for now.

Jen has two kids, Lily and Harry, and loves being their biggest, dorkiest fan at their activities. She also has a dog (Rey) and two cats (Ginny & Birdie) collectively known as the zoo.





2022 Cohort

Thomas Yi

Originally born in China, Thomas moved to Canada at a young age and grew up in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He graduated from the University of Manitoba in 2020 with a Bachelor of Science in Pharmacy.

When he was enrolled in pharmacy school, Thomas also worked at an independent pharmacy. This particular pharmacy serviced group homes that assisted individuals with disabilities and provided them with various levels of support. He later worked at another pharmacy that was owned by a group of reserves in the Interlake region of Manitoba that provided distance care to people living on the reserves.

After graduating from pharmacy school, Thomas continued working in Manitoba's Interlake region, transferring to the Interlake-Eastern Health Authority as a pharmacist to support the community hospitals of Ashern and Eriksdale. During that time, he explored options to advance his learning and found the PharmD program at Memorial University.

When he began working at a virtual pharmacy startup, he met Dan, a coworker who was coincidentally enrolled in Memorial University's PharmD for Working Professionals Program. This solidified his decision to

apply, particularly because the program was designed for pharmacists who wanted to continue working full time while earning their degree.

He has found the program to be quite helpful and has applied topics covered in lectures to his real-world practice. The courses have served as important refreshers for him, covering topics not commonly used in practice and providing in-depth knowledge on content previously taught in his bachelor of pharmacy degree courses.

Thomas is now nearing the end of the program. Looking ahead, he plans to continually learn throughout his life and apply his learnings within his practice. He is considering both formal postgraduate programs and less formal learning opportunities down the road.

In his spare time, Thomas likes to hike in the great Canadian outdoors and takes great pride in his home barista skills. He also volunteers with Bike Edmonton, a community bike shop that aims to make every day cycling more accessible in Edmonton.

2023 Cohort

Graham McIsaac

Raised in the small rural town of New Waterford on Cape Breton Island, Graham grew up in a family deeply rooted in healthcare. His father a mental health nurse, his mother a nursing professor, and his sister a family doctor, all helped him develop an early appreciation for compassionate, patient-centered care. Prior to studying pharmacy, Graham completed a Bachelor of Science in Biology at Cape Breton University, where his academic experiences strengthened his interest in health sciences. He then went on to complete the pharmacy program at Dalhousie University, graduating in 2021.

Graham began his career in community pharmacy. He worked between multiple pharmacies in the Sydney area of NS, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. This challenging introduction to the profession involved navigating rapidly changing guidelines and shined a light on the vital role pharmacists play in the circle of care and fuelled his interest in the expanding scope of the profession.

He later transitioned to hospital practice, moving to Inverness, another small rural town on Cape Breton Island. This environment profoundly shaped his professional growth. The community there offered an unfailing sense of kindness matched only by the hospital's hardworking staff. He works primarily on the inpatient wards and in the oncology clinic and provides care to a wide spectrum of patients – ranging from those who are critically ill and require urgent, complex interventions to those awaiting long-term care placements and require nothing more than a friendly conversation. Supporting these patients strengthened his understanding of the continuity of care, the importance of collaboration, and the way pharmacists can influence a patient's quality of life across all stages of health.



Motivated to deepen his clinical expertise, he chose to pursue a PharmD. Memorial University felt like a natural choice because Newfoundland felt strikingly similar to his community on Cape Breton Island and the flexible nature of the program allowed him to continue the work he values so much. This decision was reinforced by multiple colleagues who completed the program and spoke highly of the faculty and staff and the exceptional learning environment.

Graham has enjoyed being in the program, mainly attributing it to the people he met. Meeting other pharmacists embarking on the same journey was reaffirming and inspiring. He also valued learning about updates to clinical areas that have changed since his time at Dalhousie.

After graduation, Graham has his sights set on working in a more urban center within Nova Scotia, likely Halifax or Dartmouth. He also hopes to explore teaching opportunities because of the rewarding experience he had teaching pharmacy students and residents on their clinical rotations.

Outside the hospital, Graham enjoys being a part of his community choir, reading any fantasy book he can get his hands on, and baking (ideally something French and ideally containing gluten).



2024 Cohort

Jenna Breckon

Newfoundland (MUN). “I’ve always enjoyed continuing my education, and I wanted to broaden my knowledge to better serve in my role,” she says. The flexible structure of Memorial’s PharmD for Working Professionals program has been a perfect fit, allowing her to balance full-time work with her studies.

So far, Jenna’s experience in the program has been overwhelmingly positive. “The faculty have been so friendly and accommodating, and the course material is very relevant to what I do every day,” she says. “It’s helped me become a better leader for my team and given me new tools to apply in practice.”

Looking ahead, Jenna plans to continue her career as a pharmacy officer in the CAF and take advantage of the many opportunities that come with military service — from deployments to new postings across the country. She’s also particularly interested in learning more about Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) medicine, an area she hopes to explore further down the road.

Outside of work and school, Jenna is passionate about sports and teamwork. She’s been part of the military for nearly five years and was even deployed overseas in 2024. When she’s not in uniform, you can often find her on the volleyball court — she plays on the Petawawa base team and is also a member of the CAF women’s national volleyball program.

For Jenna, the PharmD journey is another step in a career defined by a desire to continue to grow in knowledge and in the pharmacy profession — and she’s excited to see where it takes her next.

Originally from Nova Scotia, Jenna Breckon is a 27-year-old pharmacy officer with the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and is currently posted to Canadian Forces Base (CFB) in Petawawa, ON. She moved to Petawawa in October 2023 after completing her pharmacy officer training, and she’s been enjoying both the professional challenges and the community ever since.

Jenna’s journey into pharmacy began at Dalhousie University, where she started her studies in 2018 and graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Pharmacy in 2022. In her third year, she decided to take her passion for pharmacy in a new direction by joining the CAF.

After graduation, Jenna completed basic military training and then a six-month hospital residency at the Dr. Everett Chalmers Regional Hospital in Fredericton, NB. That experience gave her a strong clinical foundation before taking on her current role at the CF Health Services Centre (Petawawa) pharmacy, where she now leads a pharmacy team.

With a love of learning and a desire to keep growing professionally, Jenna decided to pursue her Doctor of Pharmacy (PharmD) degree at Memorial University of

2025 Cohort

Travis Simms



Travis Simms is a graduate from Memorial University's Bachelor of Science in Pharmacy program and is a former student from the Class of 2014 (#2014WHAT). He grew up in picturesque Brigus, a small town not far from St. John's, Newfoundland & Labrador. He currently resides in Kars, New Brunswick, with his partner, three dogs, three cats, and an ever-growing flock of chickens.

Since graduating from Memorial in 2014, Travis has worked in three provinces, including New Brunswick, Alberta, and Newfoundland & Labrador. He began his career as a staff pharmacist with Shoppers Drug Mart, working at several store locations until 2019 when he became the owner of a Shoppers Drug Mart in Edmundston, New Brunswick. During the demanding times of the pandemic, coupled with chronic staffing shortages, Travis managed to run this store while temporarily taking on additional stores across northern New Brunswick during those times of need.

In May 2025, Travis shifted gears into relief pharmacy, assisting pharmacies in New Brunswick and Newfoundland. This move from pharmacy owner to relief pharmacy freed up more time for family, friends, and travel.

Travis also chose to pursue a PharmD at Memorial University during this transitional period. He wanted to use this newly found free time as an opportunity to learn and expand his skill set. With a new lens he acquired from over a decade of experience, Travis wanted to refresh his clinical skills and grow his

professional expertise so that he can continue to expand the services he can offer to patients.

With the Working Professionals Program accepting its final cohort in 2025, coupled with having more free time, Travis felt like the stars aligned and he took it as a sign to apply. Memorial University was his first choice, allowing him to get back to his roots and embrace some of his home culture while upgrading his education.

Prior to the pandemic, Travis and his partner had a goal of travelling to two new countries every year. Between work commitments and travel restrictions in the early 2020s, this goal was not always achievable. With a new schedule and more flexibility, Travis has picked up where he left off and is making up for lost time. So far this year, he visited Germany and Norway and looks forward to exploring more countries in 2026.

Happy Happenings



OUTSTANDING!

Jennifer Whyte, a student in the 2021 cohort, received the Travel Award for Working Professionals in Pharmacy



CONGRATULATIONS!

Abigail Turner, a student in the 2022 cohort, received the David J. Collins Award for NL Pharmacists



AMAZING!

The School of Pharmacy received a three-year grant from the International Grenfell Association to fund pharmacy student placements in under-resourced regions in NL

HATS OFF TO OUR NEWEST GRADUATES!

Two students conferred their degrees at Fall 2025 convocation. Congratulations to:

Ian Aucoin
Holly Noftall

STUDENT REPRESENTATION ON SCHOOL OF PHARMACY COMMITTEES (2025-2026)

Academic Council
Samantha Sweetapple

Professional Suitability
Lindsay Mell

Undergraduate Studies
Allan Choi