

# Outstanding Pharmacy Owner or Manager

Alex Tam



2008 Commitment to Care & Service awards

## Owner puts care back into the dispensary

**Alex Tam** opened Eastside Pharmacy in the downtown eastside area of Vancouver with a unique goal in mind: to ignore weekly profit targets. No, Tam hadn't forgotten the basic principles of running a business. But after almost 30 years working with several chain and independent pharmacies, Tam felt that client service and care were being paid only minimal attention in most dispensaries. He knew the focus had to be shifted back to the customer—especially in a pharmacy operating in one of Canada's poorest urban neighbourhoods.

Tam's mandate is to provide seamless, professional health care to everyone who walks through his pharmacy door, and he values "trust building" above all else. For Tam, establishing trust may come from offering up a hot coffee and a pastry to a client, or it may come through the turkey lunches he provides on Thanksgiving and Christmas. These are just two of the things Tam does to help break down the walls between patient

and caregiver, and show a vulnerable client that someone cares for them.

As a pharmacist in Vancouver's downtown eastside, Tam knows that a high percentage of his clients can have concerns and health issues not commonly encountered in other urban pharmacies. And he knows the importance of building a pharmacy staff that is sensitive to these issues. He has hired individuals with good listening skills, who express humility, compassion and respect toward others. Tam fosters a strong sense of team cohesion by encouraging all staff members to participate in operating the pharmacy, and he makes sure he does the same—from interacting with clients, to mopping floors. That teamwork is fostered outside the pharmacy, too, through staff parties and barbecues.

Perhaps most importantly, Tam understands that a successful pharmacy builds itself not only from the inside out, but also from the outside in. He has built a reputation as a valued member of the com-

munity, by supporting vital local organizations such as women's shelters.

Sharon Milligan, a downtown eastside nurse who nominated Tam, says he is well known for the help he offers to residences for people with mental illness, drug addiction and other social problems. He helps residents buy groceries and cook, devotes countless hours to educating them about proper diabetes care and the needs of those with HIV and AIDS.

"Alex treats his clients with respect and dignity, and is collegial in his approach with other professionals," writes Milligan. "We are all very lucky to have Alex and I am so pleased and proud to work with such an example of real caring professionalism."

One judge, after reviewing Tam's nomination information, notes that "working in 'difficult' neighbourhoods brings out the best in people." Alex Tam is proof positive of that.

—Neil Faba

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