

Mystery shopping not all bad

Pharmacists in general have in the past given mystery shopping the thumbs down and so, in particular, has *The Pharmaceutical Journal*. For well over 10 years, “mystery shopping” or “covert observation” has been dismissed as unethical and bad science with little validity in research into pharmacy practice.

The debate has been fuelled along the way by reports from *Which?* — most recently in February this year — which has sent actors into pharmacies to test the wits of staff at all levels in providing appropriate advice for a number of problems. This technique was derided by *The Journal* in 1988 as “the agent provocateur type of research” (*PJ*, 26 March 1988, p395) on various grounds including, for example, the fact that the body language of actor-researchers would not send the same signals as the body language of genuine patients.

There is little point in dismissing the findings of mystery shoppers out of hand

This, it has been argued, is why pharmacists and their staff do not necessarily give the actor-researchers the best advice.

However, the retail environment has moved on in the past decade, and it is time to look once again at the value of conducting this type of research. In an article published this week (p615), Jill Jesson, lecturer in public

management and sociology at Aston University, argues that there may be strengths to the technique, although she recognises its limitations.

The main limitations lie in the ethical arena. For the findings of mystery shoppers to be accepted as robust, individuals visited by the shoppers must be warned in advance that they could be the subject of such research and must also give their consent to participate. Secondly, the difficulties of using actors, who pass off themselves, and their signs and symptoms, as real when they are pretending, need to be addressed.

Nevertheless, although it is not desirable to extrapolate the findings of a handful of researchers (as conducted by *Which?*) to the whole profession, it can be argued that the technique is useful in determining shortcomings in service delivery by individuals. When staff are warned that their performance will be monitored by mystery shoppers, as part of training, the findings can be used to develop and motivate them. Indeed, as a means of continuing professional development, mystery shopping is now well established in pharmacy in Australia and is also used in New Zealand and parts of the US.

There is little point, therefore, in dismissing the findings of mystery shoppers out of hand. They are now so widely used in public services and the commercial sectors in the UK that it can only be a matter of time before they play a part in professional pharmacy development as well.

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