

A MENTORING SCHEME FOR PHARMACISTS — WHAT IS THE SECRET OF SUCCESS?

By Brenda Ecclestone, MRPharmS, and Christine E. Heading, PhD, MRPharmS

In 1999 the National Association of Women Pharmacists launched a mentoring scheme with the aim of offering pharmacists the opportunity to discuss future career plans, aspirations and constraints with an independent colleague within the profession. The scheme has been met with little interest from its potential users. In this article, the authors describe the scheme, its aims and some possible reasons why it has yet to take off

Perhaps one of the few adverse effects of the current drive for continuing professional development is the sidelining of the equally important issue of career development. Professional bodies, employers and the general public have every right to demand that each of us is professionally competent, but decisions on how to exploit our natural aptitudes, what we enjoy or what employment best suits our personal circumstances, are matters for ourselves. By default, any concern for these personal characteristics has almost come to be regarded as self-indulgent, despite the wealth of sociobiological data that explain that humans tend to excel when they find an environment that suits them best.

Awareness of this situation led the National Association of Women Pharmacists to the suspicion that many pharmacists find it hard to make contact with informed but impartial colleagues with whom they can discuss their career plans, aspirations and constraints. To make an analogy with the financial services industry, pharmacists can find it hard to locate suitable colleagues who are truly "independent". Often the fellow pharmacists to whom they might turn most obviously have business, employment, professional or even statutory interests that make them unsuitable confidantes.

THE PILOT SCHEME

Contact with other professional groups convinced NAWP that pharmacy was not the only profession to have these difficulties, and revealed that many groups solved the problem with mentoring schemes. Inspired by the possibility of setting up such a scheme, NAWP sought informal advice from several senior members of the profession who were, without exception, supportive. At the British Pharmaceutical Conference in 1998 NAWP held a briefing event with speakers from the Royal Society of Arts (now Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Qualification Board), pharmaceutical training at Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, the Museum Curators Association, a local health authority mentoring scheme for general practitioners and Dame Rennie Fritchie who at that time led a company specialising in mentoring senior figures in the National Health Service. The following spring, NAWP set up a pilot scheme accessible by any member of the Royal Pharmaceutical

Society, male and female, and since the scheme's launch, it has learnt of many other mentoring schemes based on similar, structured principles that have been devised by businesses, universities, schools, and women scientists' groups. NAWP's scheme resembles others, and shares the common theme of providing an independent source of experience for professionals to draw on when developing their careers and professional lives according to their personal interests and requirements.

For the pilot scheme, a frequently adopted pattern was followed whereby participants choose a mentor from a list, according to their individual reasons for joining the scheme. The mentor is not expected to give instruction or to advise, but is there to share their experiences and provide the "mentee" with an opportunity to discuss ideas, to identify key issues and to evaluate future plans. Typically, the mentor is in a position to share experiences on such issues as career progression, moving from one branch of pharmacy to another, setting up a business, successfully managing a career break, becoming a freelancer or locum, moving between full and part-time work, or becoming involved in pharmacy (or other) politics.

NAWP assembled a panel of about 20 potential mentors drawn from across the breadth of the profession, all of whom volunteered to give their time free of charge. Mentee contact arrangements would be negotiated but would probably be by distance-contact, ie, phone, fax, letter, e-mail, once monthly over a period of up to two years. The cost of communication would be borne by each mentee, and the only restriction on participants is that they are required to be or become members of NAWP. Strong advice was received that this was necessary to protect the association in the unlikely event of any participant alleging a grievance, for whatever reason.

LAUNCH OF THE SCHEME

The launch of the scheme was accompanied by appropriate publicity in *The Pharmaceutical Journal* and other pharmacy publications, publicity by some branches and support from the incumbent president of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, Hemant Patel. However, in contrast to the appeal for prospective mentors to which a good response was received, interest in the open invitation to join the

scheme as beneficiaries was minimal. Next to nobody wanted to use the scheme. Overall, there was a strong sense that pharmacists could not understand what the scheme could offer or how it could help them. Take-up was negligible by those who did make enquiries, seemingly because enquirers were seeking some different form of support.

WHY SO LITTLE INTEREST?

Why then did a scheme, modelled on many successful schemes, attract so little interest? It may be that an answer can be found by looking at those organisations that run successful mentoring schemes. Notably, they tend to be organisations where there is a strong link to public service employment, or businesses where there is a priority focus on maximising the potential of graduate employees. These organisations often rate their human resource management obligations highly, but expect the effort expended to pay dividends in the future. Some pharmacists working for industry may have come across mentoring schemes, and certainly some hospital pharmacists are familiar with them. For others, it may be that they have not been exposed to a culture of self-development in the career sense, and this could explain the considerable anecdotal evidence NAWP has that pharmacists find it hard to understand what mentoring is. It has been difficult to explain that mentors are not tutors, nor are they offering the kind of help available through the Listening Friends or Pharmacists Health Support schemes. Other possible explanations for lack of interest, such as not enough time, poor publicity, or dislike of the scheme's structure cannot be totally dismissed, but are not consistent with the limited evidence we have at our disposal.

As to the way forward, NAWP is totally open minded. The scheme continues to be available to anyone interested, but it may be that by collaborating with another pharmacy group, perhaps at a regional level or with an enthusiastic Society branch, more pharmacists would be willing to explore the benefits.

Brenda Ecclestone is secretary and Christine Heading is president of the National Association of Women Pharmacists (e-mail enquiries@nawp.org.uk or telephone 01453 759516)