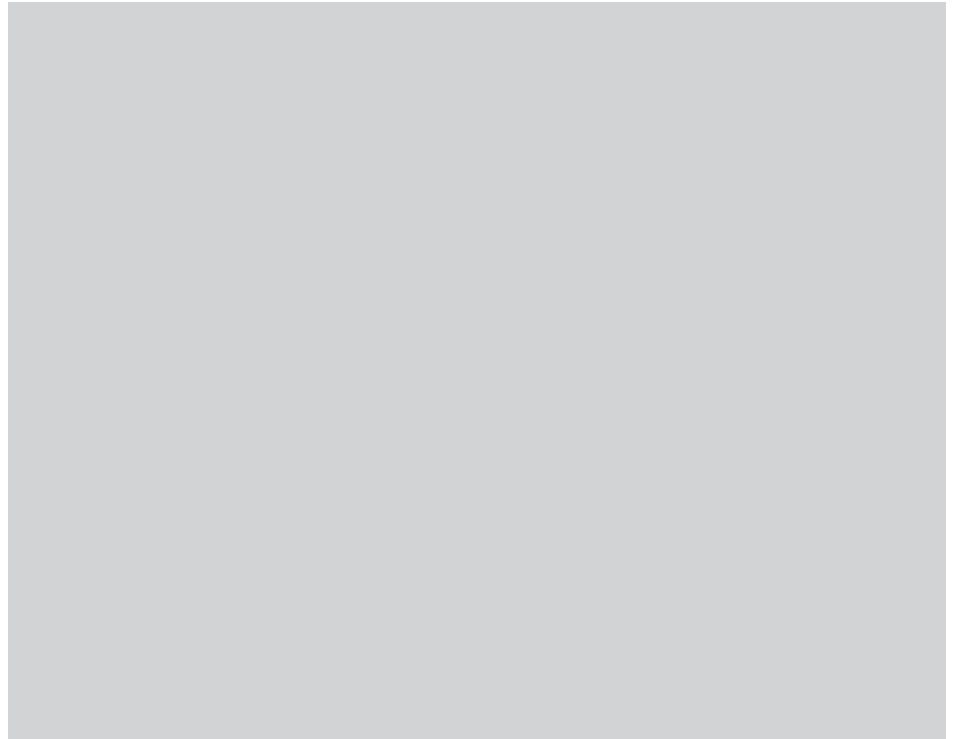


Individual pharmacists have never had it so good but it is tricky for recruiters

In a special feature this week, **Debbie Andalo** looks at the state of pharmacy recruitment and how it might be affected by the new pharmacy contract, "Agenda for change" and mandatory registration of pharmacy technicians

Pharmacy recruitment has improved slightly in the past 12 months in both the hospital and community practice sectors. The difficulties following the changes to the pharmacy degree which brought about the fallow year have peaked, community and hospital pharmacists report. But there are fears that any upturn could be short-lived because of the new working week for pharmacists and technicians in the NHS created by the Government's "Agenda for change", which is due to be introduced later this year.

Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Hospital Trust in London has been a pilot for "Agenda for change", testing the implications of this plank of the Government workforce reforms, which will see a reduction in the pharmacist working week from 39 to 37.5 hours. This will create the need for an extra three per cent of staff. A demand for more technicians will also come about as technicians' holiday entitlement increases to five weeks a year. The Department of Health is confident that pharmacist numbers can be met by improved skill mix, particularly increasing the roles and responsibilities of technicians, but this assumes there will be enough extra technicians to fill the gap. The



Pharmacy recruitment has improved in the past 12 months

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Department also points out that new “recruitment and retention” payments (levels to be decided locally), will be offered as a “carrot” to help fill some pharmacy posts. Tony West, head of pharmacy at the trust and the new president of the Guild of Healthcare Pharmacists, said: “Agenda for change is going to have implications across the country. If we replace loss of hours with more staff it is going to create more demand. I think there is going to be a blip in the recruitment picture in the next year — both from pharmacists and technicians. It’s all going to add up and will bring that little bit more pressure.”

However, David Scott, regional training pharmacist for Thames Valley and the hospital pharmacist responsible for co-ordinating the annual NHS hospital pharmacist recruitment survey on behalf of the Department of Health, believes the present recruitment picture is looking rosy and is less concerned about the implications of “Agenda for change”. He said: “I was around at the last professional regrading when there was a bit of rapid movement around the immediate regrading, but once the system was in place we went back to where we were before. I don’t think ‘Agenda for change’ is going to make any radical difference.”

Views from the small multiples

Rowlands Pharmacy puts its current vacancy rate at 8 per cent. There have been recent recruitment difficulties in Balby, Doncaster, Sale and South Manchester, the company reports. In the past there have also been problems filling vacancies on the south coast. A company spokeswoman added: “We sometimes have problems with high dispensing branches requiring a willing and capable pharmacy manager who is used to dealing with such high volume.”

The United Co-op Pharmacy Group, which is based in the north west of England and the Midlands and has 128 pharmacies, puts its vacancy rate for pharmacy managers at 10 per cent. The company says it is “excited” by the opportunities created by the proposed new contract and is keen to continue to support staff development and be involved in innovative practice.

The Co-op is also investing in initiatives which will free pharmacist time, such as automation and the employment of checking technicians. It has an eye on mandatory registration and is investing in courses to ensure that staff are prepared for the changes. The company’s general manager John Nuttall said: “There has never been such an exciting time for the profession and the opportunities available in the Co-op for our pharmacists are growing daily with our business.”

Views from the large multiples

Moss Pharmacy admits that pharmacist recruitment continues to be a key business priority. Its acting head of human resources, David Cooper, said: “Our situation has definitely improved during the past year although certain geographic locations remain a challenge.” He claimed its recruitment strategy is reaping benefits as well as the company’s commitment to existing and potential employees of personal development and reward. Mr Cooper added: “Asking and understanding what our employees value is part of a wider business strategy.” The company still uses traditional advertising routes to recruit but this is now heavily supplemented by web-based advertising. He said: “The right technology enables proactive management of existing and new vacancies.”

Boots The Chemists reports improved retention rates for pharmacists. Its training and development opportunities are attractive to prospective employees, it claimed. Paul Stretton, head of pharmacy resourcing, added: “We have a new executive team in place and there is a renewed emphasis on pharmacy — it is at the heart of the company.” Boots accepts that pharmacy recruitment is an “issue” for the profession. Mr Stretton said: “It is true that certain geographical locations present challenges in recruiting pharmacists. However, we think our incentives coupled with the attractiveness of working for the UK’s most trusted brand puts us in a good place.” The career path which Boots offers pharmacists is a key plank of its recruitment strategy and it has a commitment to training. However, Mr Stretton added: “We have to be flexible in our recruitment practice and, like others, we do recruit from a number of EU countries as well as the UK.”

Views from some hospital trusts

Guy's and St Thomas' Hospital NHS Trust has seen its pharmacy vacancy rate stay at 5 per cent for the second year running. The trust brought in a recruitment freeze over Christmas 2003, which delayed posts being filled by six weeks, according to its head of pharmacy Tony West. The trust also reports problems finding suitably experienced pharmacy staff, he said.

Mr West, who is president of the Guild of Healthcare Pharmacists, said that nationally the recruitment picture is patchy, with East Anglia still having difficulty filling posts. He believes the national NHS recruitment campaign which has thrown the spot light on pharmacists will have only a limited success. He explained: "We are quite a different profession compared to others in the NHS because the majority of pharmacists work in the private sector — there are not a vast number to attract back to the health service."

In the North of England, Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust said pharmacy recruitment has not been a problem although, according to its head of pharmacy services, Liz Kay, there may not be as many applicants per post as there have been in the past. "This may be because of the breadth of opportunities which have been created by primary care trusts. There are a whole range of opportunities for the profession which have not existed before."

The trust has in the past year also taken on the training responsibilities for pharmacy technicians across Yorkshire in preparation for mandatory registration for pharmacy support staff. "The recruitment problems we have seen in the last year are with technicians. We know from our own experience that when we have 'home grown' our own technicians the quality is excellent."

In another part of Yorkshire a hospital trust has increased its pharmacy team by 30 per cent in the past 12 months despite the current recruitment problems. Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust has taken on nine extra pharmacists and six technicians by offering them the chance to work flexibly and to be part of a reorganisation of pharmacy services which put the patient at the centre. Head of pharmaceutical services for Pinderfields General Hospital and Pontefract General Infirmary, John Fretwell, who has been behind the initiative, said: "Offering staff flexible working has definitely been a factor in recruitment. The other striking thing I think is that the majority of pharmacists we have recruited have come over from the community because we were offering them the clinical challenge to work closely with patients in a multidisciplinary team."

He is confident that recruitment will continue to improve in the coming year because he believes that hospital is an attractive sector to work in. Latest statistics from the national hospital pharmacy survey show that more pharmacists are moving from community into hospital than the other way. Dr Scott believes the biggest current problem facing the profession is the mobility of its younger workforce. The latest national hospital pharmacy survey, which reflects recruitment from August 2002 until July 2003, revealed that 30 per cent of junior pharmacist posts in hospital were either filled by locums or left vacant. Dr Scott said: "When I trained it was very

difficult to imagine that you were not taking somebody on for life. Now the situation is much more flexible, which is good for the individual, but bad for the service. The biggest issue facing us now is how to manage the service with a very mobile junior workforce."

The desire of community pharmacists to switch to the hospital sector is confirmed by the agency Orion Locums, but there are reports that hospitals have been reluctant to take them on. Managing director Helen Rudanec said: "We have offered hospitals the chance to take these community pharmacists on a reduced rate for a couple of months so

that they can bring them up to speed on the hospital side, but they just don't have the time or the resources to train them." The agency has, however, recruited community pharmacists to the prison service in the past year as an interim move before switching them to the hospital sector. She said: "We have found that if the pharmacists move from the community into the prison service and get that extra experience, then the hospitals like them."

Community pharmacy, which saw vacancy rates improve by 30 per cent between 2002–03, report that the upward trend has continued in the past 12 months. Rowlands and the United Co-op Pharmacy Group, both small multiples, report similar vacancy rates: 10 per cent for Rowlands and a slightly lower 8 per cent for the Co-op. Large multiple Moss Pharmacy also believes that recruitment has got better since this time last year. The company's acting head of human resources David Cooper said: "I can't say it's swimming but certainly there is an improvement in the market. There are, though, still certain geographical challenges — if there is going to be any surplus then it's going to be places like Greater London and there have been reasonable improvements in Edinburgh and Glasgow."

But he is concerned about the recruitment implications for the industry of mandatory registration for pharmacy technicians from next year and the changes to pharmacists' role brought about by their new contract. He said: "I think that the market for technicians in the coming year will become tight." Moss, however, hopes to escape any squeeze on technician posts because it has continued its policy to run NVQ training for its technicians and other pharmacy support staff.

The development of primary care trusts since last year has increased the career options for the profession but, according to the chairman of the Primary Care Pharmacists Association, the problem has

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Statistics show more pharmacists are looking to move from community into hospital than the other way

been to find candidates with the experience of the wider NHS which is needed to take up these new opportunities. Sue Carter, who is head of prescribing and pharmacy and pharmaceutical adviser for Adur, Arun and Worthing PCT and also a member of the Guild of Healthcare Pharmacists, said: "A lot of primary care trusts are having enormous difficulty finding staff with the relevant experience and skills to fill these pharmacy posts. There are a lot of vacancies. It is difficult to find people with the necessary background

Views from a supermarket

The supermarket chain ASDA says the number of pharmacy vacancies has gone down in the past year. It currently has three pharmacy manager posts to fill and 13 vacancies for pharmacists. Its recruitment strategy in the past 12 months has been to raise awareness of the pharmacy opportunities with ASDA to "produce a gentle stream of candidates". The company has built a database of potential candidates to which it can refer when vacancies occur. People on the database are sent regular company newsletters and updates on available vacancies. ASDA has also used videos which feature real-life pharmacists as part of its recruitment strategy.

Looking to the future, a company spokeswoman said: "There are a lot of exciting things on the horizon, especially with the new pharmacy services contract in the pipeline. We want to fully embrace this fantastic opportunity enabling us to offer a better and wider range of services and products to our customers."

Views from a locum agency

The impact on the profession of mandatory registration of pharmacy technicians from next year is already being felt, according to locum agency Orion Locums. The company has a potential 168 South African qualified pharmacists who are keen to come to the UK and although they cannot work as pharmacists, in the past South African trained pharmacists have been able to work as technicians.

However, the agency was only able to place around 60 of them this year because hospitals, with a view to mandatory registration which requires NVQ training, refused to take them on because they were not NVQ-trained. The agency's managing director Helen Rudanec said: "Already a number of hospitals are making the requirement that technicians are NVQ-qualified. They are demanding UK-qualified technicians. Because of this our strategy is now to target the colleges and universities so that we can recruit from there as soon as they have qualified."

in the wider NHS. There are interesting PCT posts available but they need to find people with the gravitas and the experience.”

The implications of “Agenda for change” are also already being felt in the primary care sector. Ms Carter added: “There is already a

Latest official DoH recruitment statistics

Year	Vacancy rates (%)	
	Pharmacist	Technician
2002	6.6	2.7
2003	6.0	2.6

At the end of March 2003 there were 290 pharmacy posts and 130 technician posts which had remained unfilled for more than three months

lot of grade drifting because of ‘Agenda for change’. There have been quite a lot of cases in primary care where grades have been made higher in order to recruit somebody. The stakes have been upped. My view is that recruitment is going to get better in the future long term but not in the short term. It’s going to take a couple of years for the full ramifications of ‘Agenda for change’ to settle down.”

The lack of certainty over the new pharmacy contract which will bring about new working practices, coupled with the unknown implications of “Agenda for change”, have helped paint a pessimistic picture of future recruitment, especially in the short term. Until these fundamental changes have had a chance to bed down it is likely that recruitment will remain in a state of flux and destroy any recent improvements brought about by the end to the problems created by the fallow year.

National hospital pharmacy staffing survey 2003

- 70 per cent of hospital pharmacies said targets were missed and services restricted because of continuing staff shortages
- 30 per cent of junior pharmacy posts left vacant or filled by locums
- 102 more full time equivalent pharmacists in the sector between August 2002 and July 2003 than in the previous 12 months
- Nearly double the number of community pharmacies moved into the hospital sector than vice versa
- 1.6 per cent of hospital pharmacists were recruited by primary care
- The number of pharmacists who did hospital preregistration training and decided to stay in the hospital sector was 64 per cent and was roughly the same as the previous year

International recruitment — the Canadian experience

Canada’s only national pharmacy chain, Shoppers Drug Mart, is hoping to persuade 150 pharmacists and 70 potential pharmacist-owners to join its ranks as part of its latest international recruitment drive which includes the UK.

Last year the company recruited 137 pharmacists from overseas to help beat Canada’s own recruitment difficulties. There are reports that the country needs to boost its number of qualified pharmacists, currently at around 27,000, by 10 per cent to keep pace with the demand for services.

Rebecca Waddell, Shoppers Drug Mart director for recruitment and retention, said: “We love UK pharmacists and they love us right back. We have had nothing but good experiences with UK recruits.” She added: “They have all been highly professional, caring committed and well educated.”

She said the company was an attractive option for pharmacists from the UK because they can own their own store within “a couple of years” without having to make an initial capital investment. The company also has an attractive support package, which includes training and continuing professional development. It also deals with the bureaucracy of moving including work permits and visas.

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