

# WHY WORK AS A PHARMACY LOCUM?

By Pamela Mason, MRPharmS

*Working as a pharmacy locum can offer flexibility and experience and the current opportunities are enormous.*

*This article looks at how locums, and their employers, can get the best from the work they do*

**L**ocum pharmacists are in great demand in both community and hospital pharmacy. There are several reasons for this. Community pharmacies open for increasingly longer hours, and this means that two or more pharmacists are now required to cover the working week. In hospital pharmacy, too, the nine-to-five day has become a thing of the past, again with implications for staffing arrangements.

To complicate matters further, both sectors are facing recruitment problems. Many pharmacy multiples find it hard to fill permanent pharmacist posts, and hospital recruitment suffers to some extent because salaries in community pharmacy — at least for full-time posts — tend to be higher. With the change from a three-year to a four-year pharmacy course in England and

Wales, the current “fallow year” means that there are almost no preregistration trainees at the moment, and few pharmacists will register this summer.

In addition, there are new posts being created in primary care groups and trusts, attracting pharmacists from all sectors of the profession. Finally, an increasing number of pharmacists are getting involved in providing of additional pharmacy services (eg, medication review, domiciliary visits, services to nursing homes, etc), and in continuing professional development activities, all of which may take them away from the pharmacy and result in the need for locums. The opportunities for locuming are therefore enormous.

## QUALIFICATIONS

To be a locum in Britain, pharmacists must be registered with the Royal Pharmaceutical Society. Those who have trained in another country need to fulfil various requirements to register here. If pharmacists have qualified in a member country of the European Union and can provide evidence that their education and training fulfils the current EU directive, they can work in Britain almost straight away.

Again, for those registered in Australia or New Zealand, countries with which the Society has reciprocal agreements, little formality is involved, and following an interview and a month's experience in a British pharmacy, these pharmacists are free to work as locums.

Pharmacists who have trained in countries that are neither members of the EU nor have reciprocal agreements with the So-

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ciety might need to do further training. They will also need to complete a period of preregistration training and pass a registration examination.

Having a postgraduate diploma in clinical pharmacy is useful for all pharmacists wanting to work as a locum. It can be a real help for locums seeking jobs in hospital pharmacy, and increasingly in community pharmacy too. It can also help those who work a couple of days a week for a primary care group and the rest of the week as a locum.

For hospital jobs, being able to offer expertise in areas such as radiopharmacy, quality control, central intravenous additive services (CIVAS) or cytotoxics production is often valuable. This is because most permanent pharmacists want to work directly with patients, and it is increasingly difficult to find pharmacists to fulfil these other roles. Even though support staff are increasingly involved in these departments, some pharmacists are still needed.

Furthermore, the new Health and Social Care Bill, currently going through Parliament, means that all practising pharmacists, including locums, may need to be included on formal health authority lists, and so the days of locums making informal arrangements with pharmacist owners could disappear.

The recently formed Association of Locum Pharmacy Agencies (ALPhA) is aiming to set standards for locums and

locum agencies (see ALPhA panel, p477). This means that, among other things, locums may have to start providing evidence that they are competent to practise, which has implications for continuing professional development.

#### ADVANTAGES

There are many advantages in working as a

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locum. Principally, it means being your own boss and having the ability to work when and where you like. You can work as many or as few hours as you wish, and to a large extent you can control your own income. This is useful both when you want extra money to pay for a holiday or a new kitchen or when you want a day off to watch your son or daughter take part in school sports; that level of freedom is worth a lot.

Another advantage is that you can usually leave the pharmacy behind at the end of

the working day and not go home to a pile of paperwork.

Undoubtedly, however, the biggest advantage is the experience of working in a variety of locations and different types of pharmacy. Every pharmacy is unique — in its location, layout, clientele and the way it is managed. You can also gain a range of professional experiences that would be more difficult to achieve in one permanent position, and this allows you to find out what type or sector of pharmacy you most enjoy working in before committing yourself to a permanent job.

#### DISADVANTAGES

However, locum work has its pitfalls. First your hours of work can fluctuate considerably. If you are booked for the whole day, this means working for the whole of the pharmacy's opening hours, which can be anything from 9am until 5pm, or from 8am until 10pm. You may also be expected to work after opening hours, delivering medicines to patients' homes and to residential and nursing homes. This can have a huge impact on your social life. You also need to adapt to different surroundings and different systems. The travelling and finding the pharmacy, especially if you are frequently working in different places, can be exhausting, and working with different computer systems and different cash registers and burglar alarms can be daunting.

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## Tips for owners and managers: help your locums to help you

Locums will be able to do their best work for you if you can provide them with information they might need and leave it in a place where they can easily find it. Be clear in your instructions as to who is responsible for doing what in the pharmacy.

- Provide all relevant information for running the pharmacy, written down and left in an obvious place. Consider keeping this information in a special locum file. Be clear about what you expect of your locums.
- Leave reference sources such as the British National Formulary, Martindale, the Drug Tariff and OTC Directories where they are easy to find.
- Leave the computer instruction manual in an obvious place, with clear instructions on how to access the software, including any passwords and how to close down the system, with any backing up required at the end of the day.
- Provide a list of all your staff, with their names, responsibilities and hours of work.
- Leave information on what to do in case of emergencies (such as burglaries, floods, burst pipes) with telephone numbers (local police, glaziers, plumbers, locksmiths, burglar alarm company, etc).
- Provide details about deliveries (which suppliers deliver at different times of day) and stock ordering (which are the preferred suppliers for different types of stock, deadlines for ordering and whether the supplier calls the pharmacy or vice versa).
- Provide details on opening and closing procedures for the pharmacy, including operation of the burglar alarm and who holds the pharmacy keys.
- Provide information on any regular Controlled Drug prescriptions and when patients are expected to come for supplies.
- Be clear about your system for charging for private prescriptions.
- Leave instructions on your cashing up procedures, stating who is responsible and how often you expect cash to be taken to the bank.
- Provide information on any services (such as nursing homes, collection and delivery services) and what you expect in terms of the locum's involvement with these.
- Provide information on the local GPs, including their surgery hours and telephone numbers.

One of the frustrations of locum work in hospital is that many of the jobs offered tend to be at B and C grades, and for pharmacists with plenty of expertise, say in medicines information or clinical services, it can be disappointing to have to work in the dispensary most of the time. Jobs in smaller hospitals, however, sometimes offer a wider range of activities for locums, and it may be possible to gain experience outside the dispensary.

Job security is also an issue, and your income is not guaranteed and could fluctuate. However, in the current climate, pharmacists who are competent are unlikely to be without work, and it is far more likely that you could book a week's work several times over.

### PAY AND CONDITIONS

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Pay can vary quite a bit and unless you obtain work through a locum agency, you may have to negotiate them yourself. As a guide most locum agencies offer from £16–£19 an hour. These rates apply to both community and hospital for the "normal" working hours, say between 8am and 6pm. Hourly rates in hospital may be a little bit higher than in the community but total earnings may be lower because the working day is usually not so long. Rates are sometimes higher for evening and Saturday work, and almost always for Sundays and bank holidays when the rates can be between £25 and £30 an hour. Some employer pharmacists are also willing to pay extra for last-minute bookings.

Locums in community pharmacy have traditionally tended to cover holidays and

days off rather than full-time vacancies, but increasingly this is changing as recruitment for permanent posts becomes more difficult. In hospital pharmacy, locums often fill in while a permanent pharmacist is found, and this means that posts in hospital tend to be longer term than those in community. It is not uncommon to be asked to work in one hospital for several months, although shorter term jobs are on offer.

Travel expenses and accommodation, if required, also need to be considered. Locum agencies tend to organise these, but pharmacists working independently need to remember to discuss hotel bills and costs of transport. Most pharmacist owners will pay either public transport costs or car expenses of 20–25p a mile, occasionally more.

Another thing to consider is the need to

## Tips for new locums: be clear what you are expected to do

Working as a locum can take you to many different places, each with its own ways of working and customer base. This is both a blessing and a curse. Being aware of what you will be expected to do, where and when will help smooth your passage.

- Remember that when you have made a booking to do a locum, either verbally or in writing, you and the owner or manager have a binding contract. If you find you are unavailable, such as a result of illness or bereavement, contact the proprietor immediately. Of course, this also applies to owners who want to change arrangements.
- Always double check dates and times you have agreed to work, including any "after hours" duties, such as rotas or deliveries, and also what the arrangements are in relation to lunch breaks.
- Ensure that you have the full name and address of the pharmacy and a telephone number for both the pharmacy and, if possible, an emergency number for the owner or manager.
- Always contact the owner or manager beforehand, because he or she may want to give you additional information, which may not have provided by a locum agency if you made the initial booking with it.
- Check what professional indemnity insurance is provided. Ask if the pharmacy is a National Pharmaceutical Association member and, if in doubt, check the validity of the insurance with the NPA. You may also wish to consider obtaining your own professional indemnity insurance.
- Find out in advance which computer system the pharmacy uses and how many of the staff are familiar with it.
- Find out how many support staff there are, their hours of work and what their level of experience, training and responsibilities are.
- Find out if the pharmacy serves any registered drug addicts and, if so, how many.
- Find out if the pharmacy services any homes and, if so, how many and on which days of the week and what your role is likely to be (eg, deliveries, review of medication, etc).
- Find out who holds the keys to the pharmacy and what is expected of you in relation to locking up and setting the burglar alarm.
- Get an idea of what the rush hour traffic is like and where the car parking facilities are or where the nearest train station or bus stop is, so you can allow plenty of time for arriving at the pharmacy promptly.
- Remember that reliability is the hallmark of a good locum.

provide for your own pension, holiday pay, sickness pay and income tax.

### RESPONSIBILITIES

The term locum is short for "locum tenens" a phrase which means, literally, "holding the place". Working as a locum means having all the responsibility of a manager or owner without necessarily being familiar with the pharmacy: it is no soft option. The professional obligations of a locum are essentially the same as those of any other pharmacist, but the specific tasks required can vary from pharmacy to pharmacy, and will depend to some extent on the experience and training of the staff as well as the normal working practices of the manager or owner (see Tips for new locums panel, above).

As a guide, however, locums in community pharmacy may be expected to endorse, count, record and file prescriptions; order dispensary and counter stock; complete an end-of-the day back-up on the computer; cash up and bank the takings; pay staff wages; lock up the pharmacy and set the burglar alarm; and deliver prescriptions to patients' homes or nursing and residential homes. In most cases, hospital locums are expected to work in the dispensary, although this will depend on the experience of the locum and will vary between hospitals. However, locums may sometimes be expected to visit wards to review drug charts and check patients' medication.

### KEEPING UP TO DATE

Keeping up to date and continuing your professional development is as important for locums as it is for all pharmacists, and in the context of clinical governance is definitely not an optional extra. It is therefore important to read *The Pharmaceutical Journal* each week, make use of the distance learning packs and workshops provided by the Centres for Pharmacy Postgraduate Education and attend conferences where possible. Consideration should also be given to taking out subscriptions to other publications such as the *Drug and Therapeutics Bulletin*, as well as making use of the internet, local drug information centres and postgraduate medical centres. For pharmacists who have not worked for a while, returning to practice can be quite daunting, and again the Centres for Pharmacy Postgraduate Ed-

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ucation provide a residential workshop and a distance learning pack for this.

### PROFESSIONAL INDEMNITY

All locums need to make sure they are covered by professional indemnity insurance. Working for a pharmacy or multiple in membership of the National Pharmaceutical Association means a locum is covered by the member's professional indemnity insurance — the cover extends both to the NPA member plus any person engaged in the pharmacy, including locums.

Locums should always check the situation with regard to professional indemnity before accepting a booking, and make sure that any cover is in force and applies to the locum. Locum pharmacists should give consideration to obtaining their own personal professional indemnity cover.

### OWNERS AND MANAGERS

During the last few years it has become very much a locum's market, but pharmacy owners and managers will want to ensure that they attract the best locums.

Growing competition means that people have increasing choice as to where they get their prescriptions filled and buy their over-the-counter medicines, so owners need to be sure that they leave their pharmacies in the hands of a competent locum. However, it can be quite a tall order taking over the management of a pharmacy at short notice, and there is much owners can do to make it easier and more enjoyable for the locum (see Tips for Owners panel, p475).

Not surprisingly, the top priority on most locums' lists is to work in a tidy and well organised pharmacy with clear instructions provided on all the pharmacy's operating procedures, including the computer. Even the most obvious things can be useful for a new locum, such as clear directions on

## ASSOCIATION OF LOCUM PHARMACY AGENCIES

Launched last September, the Association of Locum Pharmacy Agencies (ALPhA) is a new association which aims to set standards for locum agencies and locums. The founding members of ALPhA were Jenrick Medical, Elite Recruitment, Locum-link and Provincial Pharmacy Locum Services.

The association was established because there are no controls over locum agencies, particularly with regard to the quality of locums.

- Over the past 20 years, the locum market has increased considerably, with the number of locum agencies increasing from four in the early 1980s to over 30 today.
- The current shortage of pharmacists means that one-fifth of all community pharmacies are staffed by locums.

Moreover, increasing public awareness and demand for accountability from health professionals, together with the fact that the employer is responsible for ensuring adequate and competent pharmacist cover have created the need for standards.

The idea is that ALPhA will establish, maintain and continuously improve standards in the locum industry. Intending

member agencies of ALPhA will have to show that they can comply with various minimum criteria, such as satisfactory administrative capacity and professional knowledge to deal with technical issues, queries and complaints.

Members will also have to advertise their intent to join ALPhA in *The Pharmaceutical Journal* and will be expected to provide a declaration of their financial stability and professional integrity. In return they will be able to use the association's logo and will receive support from ALPhA. There will be a published complaints procedure for problems relating to the locum which can be lodged by the employer and vice versa and about a locum agency by the employer or locum.

Members of ALPhA will have to register prospective locums and, in addition to a copy of their Royal Pharmaceutical Society registration certificate, locums will have to provide at least two professional referees and show that they are free of Statutory Committee involvement. There will also be standards in relation to making the actual booking. Member agencies will have to check that appropriate insurances are in place, specify details of the services required by the locum and confirm fees and expenses.

getting to the pharmacy and where to park.

Finally, all locums appreciate prompt payment. Owners should explain how this will be arranged — cash, cheque, or bank transfer — and where payments will be left.

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