

THE RECRUITMENT CRISIS: IS IT OVER?

By Debbie Andalo

This month's special feature looks at pharmacy recruitment. It includes five case studies that focus on recruitment problems in the hospital and community sectors, and the strategies employed to overcome them

Community pharmacy has seen a 35 per cent improvement in recruitment in the past year as companies adopt more aggressive strategies to attract and keep pharmacists. The recruitment crisis may have peaked in the community sector but hospitals are continuing to have difficulty filling posts as pharmacists are seduced by new career opportunities in primary care created by the National Health Service reforms. In a shrinking market, the hospital trusts are increasingly placing contracts with locum agencies so that they can jump to the top of the recruitment queue. Locum agencies have also noticed a trend by trusts to prefer to take on United Kingdom-trained pharmacy technicians, although some of these posts continue to be filled by pharmacists, primarily from South Africa, who are unwilling to undergo the extra training that allows them to practise as pharmacists in the UK. Trusts also report there is an increasing problem filling technician posts because trained staff do not exist.

AFFECT OF THE FALLOW YEAR

All pharmacy sectors have had to overcome the knock-on effects of the recent changes to the degree courses in England and Wales, which were switched from three to four years creating what has become known as the "fallow" year. Tony West, head of pharmacy at Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Trust, London, said the repercussions of the fallow year had peaked: "We had problems with the fallow year like everybody else and our vacancy rate hit 10 per cent at one point because there just were not many juniors around. The vacancy rate now is around 5 per cent. The problem now, though, is that that 5 per cent is almost exclusively for senior staff. We can fully recruit to junior posts but it is the seniors we cannot find."

The recruitment problems currently, he believes, are the result of a lack of proper workforce training for the past quarter of a century. He said: "Nationally our workforce planning has been a complete shambles for the past 25 years. Ten years ago, there was concern that registration was growing and that there may be unemployed pharmacists, so restrictions were brought in on undergraduates going through pharmacy schools. And then the decision was taken to change it all to four years' training and have fewer



Applicants are being attracted by more aggressive recruitment campaigns

Hospital senior positions are hard to fill

Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Trust has a 5 per cent pharmacist vacancy rate, which has improved from a 10 per cent rate in recent years. The significant difference today compared with the past is that all the posts are in senior positions. The trust continues to have no problems filling its preregistration trainee posts because it has a good reputation for training and is a teaching hospital in the centre of London, which makes it an attractive choice for young pharmacists. Its geographical position is a disadvantage, however, when it wants to fill more senior positions because of the high cost of living and housing in the capital.

"One of the problems being in central London is that there isn't a huge population immediately on your door step so people have to travel in. People generally don't regard public transport as reliable and we are in the congestion charge zone," explained head of pharmacy, Tony West. The trust relies on its reputation and flexible working options to attract staff. "What we are offering is a reputation which is based on being good at what we do. We are innovative and have some of the best practitioners in their individual field that you can find. People come here just to work alongside other people to learn."

In the north, Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust is also relying on its academic reputation to fill posts. Head of pharmacy services, Professor Liz Kay, said: "Recruitment isn't as easy as it was five or six years ago but we don't have the same level of problems that other cities do because of the range of career opportunities we offer staff. It is possible to work in Leeds in any clinical specialty which exists in health care."

The hospital is considering establishing a National Vocational Qualification training centre for pharmacy technicians to help promote skill mix. "The most difficulty we have is filling middle grade technicians. There is going to be an explosion in the opportunities for technical staff but a shortage of suitably trained people to do the type of jobs we are looking for. What we are looking at is providing a training centre for NVQ 3 which will eventually apply to NVQ level 4 in order to support these key staff."

Debbie Andalo is a freelance writer

Large multiples use more aggressive recruitment strategies to reduce vacancy rates

Lloydspharmacy reports a 35 per cent drop in its vacancy rate in the past 12 months, which it attributes to a more aggressive recruitment strategy. The company, which has 1,351 branches across the United Kingdom, has adopted agency-style tactics to find suitable candidates. The recruitment difficulties differ across the UK — posts in Norfolk are hard to fill as are posts in Grimsby and Scunthorpe in Yorkshire, and in the East of Essex.

Nigel Ward, resourcing manager for Lloydspharmacy, said: “The population of pharmacists is low in the northern areas. Pharmacists as a profession tend not to want to travel too far to work and relocation is not the norm. In their early careers they tend to settle around the university where they trained and gradually over time will migrate.” The company relies on traditional advertising in *The Pharmaceutical Journal* to recruit but is also using internet employment websites. Successful candidates are given two-months induction supervised by the area manager. They are trained in the company culture and customer services.

Vanessa Georgiou, head of human resources at Moss Pharmacy, which has 800 branches across the UK, admitted recruitment was a key business priority. She said: “We are getting more and more efficient at managing the vacancies — it is a critical business issue.” The company is committed to continuing professional development and it attempts to keep training in-house so that the company culture and the business side of the work can be passed on. The company also recognises long service. “We want to try and use the skills that people have within the organisation,” she said. Moss Pharmacy also offers a package of flexible benefits covering child care and holiday entitlements.

Boots The Chemists Ltd offers flexible working for staff as well as a staff discount card, company pension and a company bonus scheme. The company has also established its own staff association, Boots Pharmacists Association, to give members of the profession their own voice within the company. Boots reports a stable workforce and says recruitment has become easier recently — although problems remain in rural areas, such as the South West and East Anglia.

pharmacists for a time, which did not seem to concern the professional hierarchy.”

Top teaching hospitals like Guy’s and St Thomas’ are having to rely increasingly on their clinical and academic reputations to fill vacancies to stave off competition from primary care and industry, which offer higher salaries.

IMAGINATIVE CAMPAIGNS

In the current climate community pharmacies are resorting to more imaginative recruitment campaigns, including breaking into the European market, particularly Spain and Portugal, where there is a glut of qualified pharmacists. They are also turning to the internet and using recruitment websites — including their own company websites — to fill places.

The tactics appear to be paying off because they report a drop in unfilled vacancies but they are reluctant to admit that the worst may be over. Nigel Ward, resourcing manager for Lloydspharmacy, which has 1,351 branches across the UK, said: “Last September we put several recruitment strategies in place which are working effectively. It is about bringing agency-type skills in-house — so it is about headhunting and pro-active advertising. We are going out to pharmacists and headhunting them rather than just relying on placing an advertisement. We have also refined our selection so that we focus on skills and behaviour rather than just testing everything. Within a week

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we can move from taking a vacancy inquiry to making a firm offer.”

COMPETITION WITH THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Companies have been forced to use rigorous recruitment campaigns and attractive employment packages to help solve a crisis but it is likely that these kinds of strategies will become permanent fixtures of the recruitment market. The NHS reforms in both the secondary and primary sectors, which look to new skill mix and greater professional responsibility, are dependent on a healthy pharmacy workforce. But they are increasingly having to compete with the higher salaries and competitive benefit packages of the private sector. Head of human resources for Moss Pharmacy, Vanessa Georgiou, admitted: “I think the recruitment problem has peaked. I think the next year will continue to be challenging as the impact of the fallow year works through. But I think there will always be challenges — it is not a labour force where we are spoilt for choice.” And Professor Liz Kay, head of pharmacy services at Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust, added: “We are never fully staffed. We just do not have the same numbers as we used to have because of the greater opportunities for pharmacists that exist in primary care and the salary differential between hospital and the private sector.”

Further case studies continue overleaf

Agencies report a buoyant market

Locum and recruitment agencies report a buoyant market. Barry Moles, divisional manager allied health, Quality Locum Services, Hertfordshire, which specialises in placing hospital pharmacists, admitted: “There is no sector where there is no work. If we have an individual looking for a job the hospitals will come up with the money to place them.” He added: “We are coming across some agencies that are charging silly money. We are not prepared to do that — we have built up our reputation on a quality service and are not prepared to get involved in an agency war.” Eighty-five per cent of locums are placed through word of mouth and frequently stay in one post for around two months, he said. The company has overseas branches and has invested heavily in New Zealand and Australia. There is high demand from hospitals in London and the Midlands but the market in Manchester and Liverpool is difficult because trusts are cash-strapped. “The market has changed rapidly — allied health professions have overtaken doctors in terms of expenditure costs. More money is now spent on placing allied health professionals than doctors because the locum rates doctors ask to work for are ludicrous,” he said.

Locum agency, ASA Medical, works mainly with placing pharmacists in industry as well as the NHS. The key factor is industry experience, explained divisional manager, Tim Heberd. “We have more industrial places than we can fill because there are not that many pharmacists with industrial experience.” The agency, which also places permanent staff, has a growing number of community pharmacists who want to switch sectors and move into industry and hospital but their skills are not always transferable, he said. However, he admits that as you travel further north the need to keep pharmacies open becomes more important than relevant experience. Pay rates have increased as demand has also gone up, he admitted. “There does seem to be a lot of community pharmacists in the home counties who are looking to move into other areas, which suggests there are either too many of them or they are keen to develop their careers.” There is also a lot of interest in technician posts, particularly from pharmacists who qualified in South Africa. “We don’t place them in technician posts because they are overqualified but instead place them in industry where they are working alongside their peers. If the same registration rules for qualified pharmacists from New Zealand and Australia were extended to apply to pharmacists from South Africa it would go a long way to overcoming a lot of the recruitment shortages.”

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Supermarkets offer staff benefits packages

The supermarket chain ASDA admits that recruitment is a “tough” market and it has problems filling posts, particularly in the North East. It relies on recommendations from existing staff. Occasionally it may rely on a recruitment agency. The company encourages locums to apply for permanent posts. “There are also many trained pharmacists who are no longer practising and work in other professions — we would encourage these people to come back into the profession,” said a company spokeswoman. ASDA also places advertisements in *The Pharmaceutical Journal* and trade press to find suitable candidates. The company advertises at universities and conferences and on its own company website. “Online recruitment is proving a popular and successful method of finding candidates,” she added.

At interview the company will look for appropriate qualifications but also ensures that the person fits the ASDA culture and has a “customer focus.” It offers family-friendly employment contracts and for the past two years has appeared in the top 10 of *The Sunday Times* “best company to work for” survey. Pharmacists who work for ASDA have 10 hours protected time each week to get away from the dispensary and go into the community to speak to patient groups. The company has also actively been involved in lobbying the Government and the Office of Fair Trading on pricing and putting a pharmacy into every ASDA store.

Supermarket chain Tesco confirmed it has a recruitment strategy for pharmacy, which includes placing advertisements in specialist publications. The company refused to give further details about recruitment but boasted it offers all staff benefit packages and career development.

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Small multiples recruit from overseas

Rowlands pharmacies has 310 branches, mainly in the north west, along the south coast and in Scotland. Vacancy rates have dropped by 35 per cent in the past year. It was one of the first pharmacies to recruit overseas in Spain and now 38 branches are managed by Spanish trained pharmacists, which represents 15 per cent of all its stores. Commercial director of operations, Kenny Black, said: “We have brought pharmacists from Spain over on one-year renewable contracts. At the end of the first year only two pharmacists decided to leave. We offer them two months’ training in the United Kingdom so that they can overcome any language difficulties and also so they can become more integrated with the area and people they are working with. Obviously it is a shame to have to recruit from Europe because it limits the work available for UK pharmacists but we felt we had little choice because of the behaviour of agencies.”

National Co-operative Chemists Ltd reports a 79 per cent staff retention rate, which it attributes to the company’s image and ethics. It also has an 18 per cent vacancy rate for pharmacists, 2 per cent vacancy rate for dispensers and 0.5 per cent vacancy rate for pharmacy assistants. There are problems recruiting to branches in Kent, East Anglia, Humberside, Dorset, Devon and the Scottish highlands, which has the knock-on effect of creating a shortage of locums in these areas. Company general manager, John Makepeace, does not think the recruitment problems have peaked. “I think we are still in for a couple of years of shortages, particularly given the recent Office of Fair Trading report. If there is a move towards extended opening hours by supermarkets then this is going to create a huge problem for us. We would have to consider our position but it could see off two or three pharmacies in one location. Pharmacy recruitment has to be a high priority for the next two or three years.”

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