

Plentiful work in the community due to increased services and longer hours

Recruitment is booming in the community sector. **Debbie Andalo** talks to some of the main players to find out why



Community pharmacy is proving to be one of the key beneficiaries of the Government's continuing drive to offer more clinical services to patients nearer home and outside normal working hours. Over the past year, high street pharmacists have expanded the range of services they provide and some supermarkets and large multiples have ambitious targets to open more 100-hour, in-store pharmacies in the next 12 months. Both the move towards more pharmacies opening around the clock, and the political will and patient desire to provide more clinical services on the door step, are leading the increased demand for more qualified and experienced pharmacists. Recruitment in this sector is booming.

Alliance Boots, created through the merger of the Boots Group and Alliance UniChem, says its need for qualified pharmacists has gone up by around 5 per cent. In previous years the figure was nearer 1 or 2 per cent. Paul Stretton, head of pharmacy resources at Boots The Chemists, says: "Some of that increase is down to the increase in dis-

persing but also because the range of services we offer to patients has increased. There are more jobs and our business has also faced growth." United Co-operatives, which announced this month that it was merging with Co-operative Group, also reports there are now more jobs on offer in a multitude of roles.

It is a similar picture at Lloydspharmacy. Fiona Morgan, the company's head of human resources says: "Recruitment of pharmacists is going up — we need more people and we are getting better at attracting them so our vacancy rates are going down — even though our estate is growing."

Both supermarket chains Sainsbury's and Morrisons reveal that there are more permanent jobs available. Sainsbury's says the need reflects its programme to open more stores. Morrisons reveals that it is company policy to open a pharmacy in every store — provided it is economically viable. Bruce Pimlott, pharmacy general manager at Morrisons, says: "As we open up more stores there are more permanent jobs available. We are in an expansion

programme. It is our policy to get a pharmacy in every store where it would support one. But there are some areas where we would not be able to get a contract because of the competition from Lloydspharmacy and Alliance Boots for example."

Vacancy rates across the sector are generally falling, mostly due to improvements in staff recruitment and retention of staff. But United Co-operatives reports its vacancy rate has, in fact, risen in the past 12 months because some of company acquisitions have happened in "hard-to-recruit-to areas."

These hard-to-recruit-to areas, according to community pharmacy companies across the sector, have remained the same in the past 12 months. They include Norfolk and Suffolk, Cornwall and Devon as well as Cumbria. Recruitment is easier, they say, where there is a pharmacy school, such as in the large metropolitan cities like Liverpool and Leeds. Morrisons reckons that it has around 20 applicants for every vacancy in its London pharmacies but the figures do not really tell the true picture. Mr Pimlott says: "A

lot of them are from locums who are testing the water to see if it is better than what they have already. It is frustrating but it is all part of the game."

Locums may be deciding to test the water because there are fewer locum opportunities in community pharmacy this year. This is a trend which is likely to continue. United Co-operatives and Lloydspharmacy both believe that there will be a continued need for locums. United Co-operatives says, ideally, it wants to employ more "employee" relief pharmacists and relief managers but believes its use of locums will remain the same in the near future. Lloydspharmacy also reckons it will still have a need for locums in the next 12 months. However, other high street pharmacies and the supermarkets say they are using locums less and expect that trend to continue. Mr Pimlott, from Morrisons, says: "We are using fewer locums than a year ago and would expect to use fewer in the next 12 months. That is because our vacancy rate is lower than it was a year ago as we have recruited more people than we have lost." Successful recruitment and retention is also the reason why the locum market at Sainsbury's pharmacies has gone down, the company confirms. But the reason behind a drop in locum opportunities at Alliance Boots, which has started to appear in the past two years, is more than just better recruitment and retention according to Mr Stretton. He says: "A lot of locums are not geared up to deliver the [new] services, they are not trained to accommodate working across a number of different primary care trusts. Also, as an organisation, it is much better if a person sees the same pharmacist when they visit the pharmacy."

The new pharmacy community contract has played a key role in expanding services in the high street which, in turn, is boosting pharmacy recruitment. Alliance Boots already has three "core" private patient group directions for hair loss, weight loss and smoking cessation. It is also running a pilot scheme on a private PGD to provide treatment for erectile dysfunction.

However, the company is also being commissioned by the NHS to provide a whole range of other services such as palliative care and the supervision of patients on methadone. Mr Stretton says: "It is almost endless. There are a whole range of services that we can win and negotiate for with PCTs and, if successful, can change the working practices and the demand for pharmacy. While the range of services is phenomenal it can be patchy as to where those services are

won and commissioned because PCT resources are different."

This partnership with the Government to deliver more NHS services on the high street will continue and increase job and career opportunities for its pharmacists at Alliance Boots. Mr Stretton says: "The service agenda is one which we are positively embracing and working with pharmacists to deliver. That is what pharmacists have been trained to do for the past 20 years but it is only in the past two years that we have seen a realisation of that."

United Co-operatives says it has met some of the service demands created by the new contract, such as medicine use reviews, by increasing the skills of other members of the pharmacy team and by employing more checking technicians in its pharmacies. It has taken the same "up-skilling" approach for other testing and diagnostic services, the company says. But a spokeswoman adds: "In some locations additional [pharmacist] job opportunities have been created but this is largely driven by those services a PCT wishes to commission."

The supermarket chain Morrisons, which merged with Safeways in 2004, says its increase in pharmacy jobs has little to do with the new contract and more to do with the Government's decision to relax the regulations which govern the award of new pharmacy contracts. Since April 2005, pharmacies have been allowed to open if they are being established in a retail space of more than 15,000m² outside town centres. Morrisons says it has started to feel the benefit of the new regulations which, it says, are pushing up the number of pharmacy job opportunities. Mr Pimlott says: "We have gained a number of new contracts because of the relaxation over the control of new pharmacies and that is one of the reasons why there are more jobs around. We have opened 12 new pharmacies in stores in the past year — none was opened in the previous 12 months because of the integration of Morrisons and Safeways. We will be looking to improve our market share in the next 12 months because an in-store pharmacy is what customers believe is the natural range of services on offer. It is their natural home."

Morrisons, unlike other supermarkets and high street chains, has, however, deliberately stayed away from the option to open pharmacies 100 hours a week — another contract exemption brought in by the Government to increase access to pharmacists and patient choice. Mr Pimlott confirms that the company does not plan to open any stores for 100

hours a week since it is uneconomic because of the additional overheads of keeping a supermarket open longer hours.

Other supermarkets and high street chemists do not share his view. Lloydspharmacy opened its first 100-hour stores in Bristol and Cheltenham last year and plans to open more in the next 12 months. The stores are run on a rota shared between three pharmacists, working either full or part time, which has increased job opportunities. But, Ms Morgan says the 100-hour decision has to be business driven and there has to be a need, although sometimes the threat of being forced out of the market by competitors will also play a part.

United Co-operatives says it is opening a 100-hour pharmacy in Harrogate and expects others to follow where there is a "business opportunity". A company spokeswoman says: "It does create more job opportunities. However, the pool of qualified and skilled resources is not growing in line with the total number of 100-hour contracts being opened nationally. But it does create flexible working opportunities for staff."

Sainsbury's also confirms that it has taken up 100-hour contracts in "many" of its stores and this is increasing the demand for pharmacists.

During the past year Alliance Boots has had more than 70 of its stores open until midnight and others have run with 100-hour contracts. This trend will continue for the next 12 months and beyond. Mr Stretton says: "Our 100-hour contracts are expanding trading and there is a huge demand. We plan to have at least 150 by next year. Our policy is to be able to offer a midnight pharmacy to every customer within a 30-minute drive. It is bringing increasing demand for pharmacists."

The buoyancy in community pharmacy in the past 12 months has also been noticed by the National Pharmaceutical Association.

It says that in the past 12 months it has seen membership increase with more applications from new members, ie, those pharmacists who are starting a business from scratch. Sukhjit Grewal, NPA membership liaison manager, says: "Some are from locums who think there may be more [to work-life] than continuing locuming and others are registrars clubbing together, maybe three or four of them, attracted by what the new contract can offer. I think what is interesting is that in the past it was all gloom and doom coming out of the community. But now there are so many opportunities and people are beginning to look at the different options available."