

HOW TO WORK FLEXIBLY

— *and be dedicated to the job*

By DEBBIE ANDALO

For the past 16 years, a busy hospital pharmacy department in Sheffield has implemented a policy where the hours worked are not the only option for flexible working. As we move towards a 24/7 clinical service, is this a blueprint for the future?

One afternoon a week, hospital pharmacist Steve Barker picks up three of his four children from three different schools and then devotes the rest of the afternoon to being a dad. He forgets about the busy dispensary he runs and, instead, relishes the time he spends watching his family grow up. He admitted: "It's tremendous for me because it allows me to keep in touch with my children during the week rather than just at weekends. It keeps our relationship going and it also saves them having to go to the after-school club one day a week." Steve is one of the 116 staff in the pharmacy department at the busy Sheffield Northern General Hospital who have, for the past 16 years, been entitled to work flexible hours. The options available to all staff appeal not only to working parents trying to juggle a career with a family, but also to those who have other domestic commitments such as elderly parents.

Flexible working was introduced by Professor Ron Purkiss who, until recently, was chief pharmacist at the hospital. He admits that when he first started discussing the idea

with the hospital's personnel department he had to explain the definition of a term-time contract. But now, nearly two decades on, term-time work is only one of the number of different flexible contracts on offer.

Professor Purkiss said: "Quite a few years ago, many people had the idea about flexible working and I can't claim that the idea was mine, but pharmacy was the first hospital department to put this idea into practice." He was driven to bring in flexible working because he had a predominantly female workforce which he was keen to keep. "Even if you have good working systems in place I think you have to recognise that a large part of your workforce is female, particularly the pharmacy technicians, and they will go through various stages of life where they will want to work full-time and then maybe drop back to part-time when they have a family.

"Flexible working came about because I didn't want to lose good staff — especially if I have spent a lot of time training them."

Sixteen years later, he has no regrets about bringing in the system. "I am totally committed to flexible working. I believe that if you give people reasonable pay and good conditions you will tend to get the most out of them."

The only drawback he can think of is the effect it has had on the department's payroll. The appeal of flexible working is so great that staff turnover within the department is low. This means that the number of staff who qualify for salary increments linked to years of service is high.

He added: "There is also, occasionally, another down side with those staff who choose not to work a flexible contract feeling hard done by. I think there is sometimes the perception that people who work flexibly pick and choose their own hours. What critics don't realise is that all these hours are negotiated."

Throughout the pharmacy department the staff also work in dedicated teams where there is a strong sense of belonging and pulling together. Flexible working has to fit in with the needs of the whole team. Developing team working was a deliberate decision. Professor Purkiss said: "It was a way of trying to encourage staff to feel a commitment to their colleagues. If you are dealing with a large workforce it is difficult to build and maintain that sense of loyalty with such large groups of people."

Tracey Barker, wife of Steve Barker, is a qualified pharmacy technician and is deputy dispensary manager. One of her tasks is to

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organise the staff rota for the dispensary, juggling all the different contracts. She said: "You can see the benefits of flexible working just by looking at the absence levels. I think this way of working encourages staff to be honest and committed to the job. They really appreciate being able to work in this way.

"It also creates a different working environment — it improves the working atmosphere and morale."

There are a variety of flexible contracts on offer to staff. Some can work from 8.30am until 5pm while another cohort will work 9am until 5.30pm. Other staff work only term-time contracts while colleagues prefer to work during the school holidays and take time off at other times of the year.

The staff rota is worked out according to the minimum number of staff needed to run the pharmacy. Once that minimum number is reached then staff are allowed to take leave. "It doesn't happen very often that we have to refuse leave because generally staff are very sensible about it," said Tracey.

"I'm a qualified technician and my husband Steve is a pharmacist, so if the numbers are down we can provide the necessary cover."

Tracey admitted that keeping track of staff hours could be a nightmare. But she said: "All the working times are put down in a diary which is kept on my desk — everybody knows where it is. All I ask is that staff give me the information as early as they can.

"I have one member of staff who is a checking technician who works her hours around her husband's shift patterns so that she can work when her husband is at home. She can let me know a whole year's worth of hours in advance.

"It's the same with staff who only work during term time — they know the term times well in advance because the schools provide a full year calendar so those dates can go into the diary."

Another way of keeping a record of staff hours was introduced about five years ago. Every member of staff has a swipe card which they use to record their personal hours. Swipe-card machines are installed around the hospital.

Tracey explained how the system works. "It's like a credit card which staff swipe through a machine when they come into work and when they leave. They also use it to record the time they spend on lunch. We can get a print-out from the machine which shows us the hours worked and we do this once a week. We don't go through it with a fine toothcomb because there has to be a level of trust. But if, for example, we saw that swipes weren't happening, we would address it with the individual. It's not a question of staff not working the hours — sometimes they just forget the card."

The swipe system also ensures that the working patterns in the department reflect the European working hours directive

Key points to flexible working in the pharmacy department at Sheffield Northern General Hospital

- 1 The department employs 117 staff which is equal to 100 whole-time equivalents
- 1 Flexible working has been available for 16 years
- 1 All staff have the option to work flexible hours
- 1 All working hours are negotiated
- 1 Staff use a swipe card to record all hours worked including lunch breaks
- 1 Managers check a weekly swipe card print-out to verify working hours and to ensure that they meet the EU working hours directive
- 1 Contracts negotiated include term-time only, 8.30am – 5.00pm, 9am – 5.30pm
- 1 Pharmacy staff work in small teams to encourage loyalty and commitment. Flexible hours have to fit in with the needs of the team
- 1 Staff taking time off for a degree are offered a pharmacy contract to work during their holidays
- 1 Managers claim flexible working creates a committed loyal workforce

which stipulates the maximum number of hours that staff can work.

Most of the staff who choose to work flexible hours are women but the system can also appeal to men. Tracey pointed out: "I have another checking technician whose young daughter recently started school and he wanted to come in at 9.30am rather than 9am during the week so that he could drop her off. This isn't a problem because he makes up the time by taking only a half-hour lunch break rather than an hour.

"I think it's all about striking a balance and trying to accommodate people but the system does work."

Tracey and her husband Steve both work flexible hours. Tracey spelt out her normal working week. She said: "We both work three long days during the week. I start at around 8.45am and finish around 6.45pm but I leave at 3pm on two days a week.

"Although Steve starts at 8am during the week he finishes around 5.15, so quite often he will beat me home.

"I think being a working parent you do appreciate the problems that people have. If your child is sick you need to be there or if your child is in a school play you don't want to miss that."

Steve revealed that most people who join the department are unaware of the options for flexible working. "Quite a number of staff who have joined us have been surprised at how we can meet their domestic needs. I think this way of flexible working may apply somewhere like the civil service, but not in the private sector," he said.

Flexible working can also benefit staff who take up the opportunity of professional development. Those who decide to study for a degree or other qualification are encouraged to return to the department during holiday time to work. Professor Purkiss said: "Coming back to us during the holidays fits in very well with those staff who only work term time.

"I make it very clear to staff that if they want to go and study for a degree I will take them back during their vacation. They

remain on the staff so there is no trouble with their contract.

"This system works particularly well with our pharmacy technicians who want to study for a degree which are often full-time courses. I don't want to stop them doing that but if they come back during the vacation it helps out the department and at the same time it can help fund their degree.

"I had one technician, in fact, who was studying for a degree and worked for us 24 weeks of the year during the holidays — she was guaranteed that job."

The government is keen to encourage this kind of flexible working across the profession as part of its commitment to create a well motivated and qualified staff to help fulfil the changes outlined in the NHS Plan. The scheme developed at the Sheffield Northern General is promoted as an example of best practice in the Department of Health document *Improving working lives for the pharmacy team* which was published last year.¹

Professor Purkiss is keen to spread flexible working across the city of Sheffield. He was recently promoted to clinical director for medicines management and pharmacy for the Sheffield Hospitals Trust. That appointment means he is now responsible for a pharmacy team which works across four hospital sites and a workforce which has shot up to 260.

He admitted: "I don't know how many of them are women but I would imagine it could be around two-thirds. We have recently become one single trust, so the employment conditions which have been enjoyed by staff at the Northern General will have to be rolled out to the other hospitals — that will include the flexible working arrangements to which I am completely committed."

REFERENCES

1. Department of Health. *Improving working lives for the pharmacy team*. London: DoH; 2001. www.doh.gov.uk/iwl/iwlparmacy.pdf