

# Putting technicians on the map — an interview with Lesley Morgan

By DEBBIE ANDALO

Lesley Morgan has been a pharmacy technician for her entire working life. As she comes to the end of her time as president of the Association of Pharmacy Technicians UK, she tells Debbie Andalo about her career, campaigns and achievements

Lesley Morgan has come a long way since, as a 16-year-old schoolgirl in a village outside Cardiff, her mother helped her get a job in the local Boots dispensary. Now 41 years later, as she stands down as president of the Association of Pharmacy Technicians UK (APTUK), she has been responsible for putting the role of technicians, their training and education on the pharmacy profession's agenda. Her achievements, which include two stints as president, are hard to reconcile with this 57-year old modest grandmother for whom reeling off successes and accolades over the years — including an MBE for contribution to pharmacy education — does not come naturally.



Lesley Morgan: drawing pharmacists and technicians together

The philosophy which has led her to the top of her profession is a simple one. "I think if you want a wonderful life you have to make it yourself and I think you can apply the same attitude to work. There is no point sitting there saying 'they say I should do this.' Nobody is going to give you anything — you have to earn it," she says.

## A VARIED CAREER

Mrs Morgan's career has crossed from community to hospital pharmacy and even included time in a steel works. She was looking for a job in industry to boost her income before she started a family and was one of only two women surrounded by 50 men working in the analytical laboratories. She remembers: "I used to have to analyse the bricks to make sure they were the right constituents to go into the furnace. I was one of only two women there so we used to get protected from all the grotty jobs. I remember too that we used to take up cyanide in pipettes. It was probably not as dangerous as it seems because we had the

antidote at hand. That was 30 years ago and wouldn't be allowed to happen today."

The role of the pharmacy technician has fundamentally changed since she took her first steps on the career ladder. By the age of 19, with the three-year Boots dispenser apprenticeship behind her, she was in charge of her own dispensary with her own trainee working from 9am until 7pm five days a week, one in three Saturdays and every Bank Holiday. The relentless hours did not fit in well with early married life so she decided to switch careers and found herself an office job. She lasted a fortnight. "I was tied to a desk. I couldn't talk or walk around and did not feel part of the community as I had in Boots where I knew everybody and lived above the shop." She realised it was a big mistake and she moved back to pharmacy — this time working at St David's Hospital in Cardiff — a small district hospital with its own casualty department.

At St David's she was again her own boss, being in charge of her own pharmacy, a responsibility she relished. "The pharmacist was around and was responsible for me, but basically I was on my own and while I

was there I ran the pharmacy. I knew what my limits were — if I had a problem I would ask advice. There was also a matron system at the hospital so everybody knew everybody else — we worked as a big team.

"A technician today is probably less exposed than I was then. The drug treatments now are very different. I used to have a thousand pots of antibiotics which were £1 a tablet. We also used to make a lot of the medicines ourselves then," she remembers.

Throughout her career she has never shirked from taking on new tasks or responsibilities. After an eight-year break in the late 70s when she took time off to look after her young children, she realised that she would have to go back to college and study if she

wanted to carry on as a technician. Her apprenticeship with Boots was not recognised nationally. "I couldn't go back to work with the skills I had because they were eight years old," she says. She enrolled in a City and Guilds dispensing technician certificate course and within months found herself covering maternity leave at the pharmacy in the Cardiff Royal Infirmary where she stayed until she was 40. She was then headhunted to computerise the stores and purchasing departments at St David's Hospital before being offered a unique opportunity to develop aseptic services in the bone marrow unit at the University Hospital of Wales in Cardiff. "Before moving to University Hospital I had never held a syringe in my life. At that time, in 1989, all the injections were made on the wards and the pharmacists wanted them to be prepared in the pharmacy to minimise risk. At the time, this kind of service was being built up across the UK and was the forerunner of the British Oncology Pharmacists Association. I set up a technical self-help group with colleagues from Addenbroke's and the Royal Marsden." The decision to set up a support group for technicians in the same field reflects the

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ingenuity which is the hallmark of her career.

### A VARIED CAREER

Mrs Morgan's return to work after a career break was, with hindsight, a turning point. She looked at the profession with new eyes and could identify gaps in education and training. "I suppose when I came back I started agitating. I noticed on my return that there were lots of courses for pharmacists but nothing for technicians. I used to ask the pharmacists if I could come along to their meetings and they always said yes. As a technician, I personally wanted to know more."

She adds: "I was then doing clinical renal work and I wanted to know what I was giving to the patients and what drugs couldn't be given together."

Mrs Morgan was determined that technicians should be given the educational

support they needed. She was already a member of the APTUK — becoming its treasurer within one year of joining. She used her influence there and her contacts within the profession in Wales to persuade the committee of chief pharmaceutical officers in Wales to set up a subcommittee and provide her and colleagues with the funds to look at recruitment and retention of technicians across Wales. The timing was perfect because the training qualification for technicians was about to change from a City and Guilds to a BTECH. She was invited to help develop the BTECH courses across Wales which marked her transformation into educator and trainer.

She says: "At that time, all sorts of different strands were coming together for me. My job seemed to be changing all the time. I was involved at a national level with the Association and realised that at our local level in Wales, the technician grades were not as good or as high as elsewhere. I noticed at the

same time that the local technical college was offering a course in management studies — a course that the pharmacists usually went on, but I thought I'd do it because there were no technicians on managerial grades. At that time, at the University Hospital of Wales in Cardiff, there was no direct technician input into management but I achieved that in 1991."

### NATIONAL RECOGNITION

Mrs Morgan's contribution to training and education in Wales and her work with the APTUK was noticed nationally. In 1989, she was invited to be part of a working party set up jointly with the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain to look at the roles and responsibilities of technicians. "What the technicians were telling me was that they felt there was nobody to represent them. What I wanted to achieve was to draw pharmacists and technicians

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together. I felt strongly that the technicians had a valid role to play and that this wasn't being recognised.

Personally, I always had a lot of support locally, but I knew the national picture was different. I was terrified when I first went to the Society.

"I was, though, given as much right as anybody else to speak and made to feel that what I had to say was valid. I knew that somebody had to stand up and speak for technicians — but there were times when I wondered if I would have a job tomorrow." She adds: "I think that it's important if you have something to say that you say it and you have to learn to live with the consequences."

Mrs Morgan's reputation as a champion for pharmacy technicians was also noticed by the Welsh Office which was looking for somebody to develop post-qualification training for technicians. She was taken on by the Welsh Postgraduate Centre for Pharmacy Education to set up a continuing professional develop-

ment education programme for technicians — an initiative that she has developed for the past eight years. She says: "My head-teacher always felt I would make a good teacher and I feel now that I have come full circle."

As she steps down from her office as Association president, a post she has held for the past four years, technicians are at a crossroads. Registration and regulation are on the horizon and skill-mix is high on the agenda. "We have to be sure that the whole of pharmacy moves forward together. The Association feels quite strongly that the Royal Pharmaceutical Society is the right place for registration. At one point, we did look instead at the Health Professions Council but felt there was the potential for us to get lost there." She perceives that the Association will continue offering its 1,600 members professional support and advice — similar to that provided to pharmacists by the Guild of Healthcare Pharmacists.

She would like to see a future where technicians can become pharmacy directors

— leaving chief pharmacists more time to use their clinical skills. Big changes are already happening in the community with technicians working in anticoagulation clinics and assessing patient's drugs. "When I first started, I never thought I would have seen this happening," she admits. "It's really great there is such a lot going on at the moment. Globally, our status is improving. I am sure some pharmacists feel threatened by us but they shouldn't — we both have different skills. Pharmacists have a lot of clinical knowledge, technicians have some clinical knowledge but they have a lot of practical skills and work very methodically, following direction although they will also question."

"Opportunities are out there but you have got to be able to make it work — at the end of the day it's really down to you" — a sound piece of advice which she has followed with determination and courage to bring herself to the top of her profession.