

The Manchester initiative

By DEBBIE ANDALO

Crossing over from the community sector to the hospital sector is being made easier, thanks to a new “top up” course developed in Manchester. Debbie Andalo reports

Pharmacy technician Zoë Jones had 17 years experience of working in the community but lacked the qualifications she needed to realise her ambition to work in a hospital pharmacy. Now a training initiative developed in Manchester is helping her to fulfill her dream and provide a pathway for other technicians who want to cross over from the community to hospital sector. She declared: “I felt I was completely stuck in community just spending my time baling out blood pressure pills. I just wasn’t getting anywhere. I felt as far as training and development was concerned I had been left out for many years. Until now it was only my own enthusiasm for keeping myself up to date that kept me afloat.”

Ms Jones is one of 11 pharmacy technicians who have switched from community to hospital and been recruited onto a day release “top up” course developed by the Greater Manchester Workforce Development Confederation — the organisation responsible for identifying and tackling trust staff recruitment — and further education colleges in the region. The 12-month course was designed following local consultation with senior pharmacists and primary care organisations in the region. The course covers actions and uses of drugs, microbiology for pharmacy and pharmacy production including aseptic training. At the end technicians leave with a BTEC National Certificate of Achievement in Pharmacy Services which is recognised by trusts in the region as reflecting the standard required by former community technicians to work in the hospital sector.

DEVELOPING THE COURSE

Pharmacy technician Joanne McLaughlin helped develop the initiative when she was responsible for the training and development of technicians at North Manchester General Hospital. She said she realised the need for a top up course when she ran a recruitment day for technicians and discovered that out of 60 community technicians who were keen to transfer to the hospital sector only three had the BTEC National

Certificate in Pharmacy Services, or equivalent, which was the qualification needed to work as a hospital technician in the region. The recruitment problems in hospital pharmacy and the knowledge that there were willing technicians who wanted to cross over from the community sector could not be ignored. Ms McLaughlin said: “What we realised we needed to do was to come up with a course for those technicians who had worked in the community that was recognised by the trust. We didn’t want to make them go through two years as a student technician on a BTEC because that was unnecessary — we wanted something which would top up their existing knowledge.”

Senior pharmacists and primary care organisations were sent a questionnaire which asked them to list the most important areas of knowledge and skills they believed a hospital pharmacy technician required. The results were then used to develop the course. “Using the results of the survey we then selected six BTEC units which met those needs and filled the gaps which the pharmacists felt were missing,” explained Ms McLaughlin. At the end of the course the technicians, who were originally classified as MTO 1 when they moved into the hospital sector, are qualified to go on to achieve a MTO 2 grade. Ms McLaughlin said: “The conversion to MTO 2 is done in-house. But what we feel this course has done is given these technicians a foot on the ladder — they can start moving on. The course is recognised across Greater Manchester which means if they want to they can then apply for jobs across 40 other trusts. Apart from the career structure it offers technicians, it also gives employers the peace of mind that they are qualified to work in the hospital sector and are up to scratch.” Technicians on the top up course are due to finish their studies in July and there seems to be little regret over the move over from community to hospital.

TECHNICIAN GUIDE

As part of the Manchester project, a guide to the variety of national courses available to become a pharmacy technician has been produced. It provides useful information for technicians and their employers in the run up to technician regulation and registration.

But the document has not won universal support, illustrating the divisions between hospital and community pharmacy that need to be addressed before registration is introduced.

The National Pharmaceutical Association, which represents community pharmacists and their staff, has challenged the guide because it recommends further study for community pharmacists if they want to move into the hospital sector even if they have the NPA’s NVQ Level 3 in pharmacy services.

The guide suggests community technicians will only be competent if they have passed the BTEC National Certificate of Achievement in Pharmacy Services as well. Lesley Johnson, head of education and training at the NPA said: “I have known many staff with our NVQ 3 who have moved very successfully from community to hospital pharmacy and have risen to the challenges.”

The debate about the guide illustrates the need for national standards and recognised qualifications, according to Janet Flint project manager for the regulation of support staff at the Royal Pharmaceutical Society. Ms Flint, who has special responsibility for technician regulation and registration said: “One of the reasons people have been pushing for national registration and regulation for technicians is that there are so many different courses which all have slightly different criteria. We hope what we are doing at the Society will help to standardise the education and training and entry level requirements of technicians.”

The debate about NVQ versus BTEC has erupted because the NVQ is based on practical abilities, although it does require completion of an underpinning knowledge programme. In contrast the BTEC is viewed as a more traditional academic qualification. Ms Flint admitted: “What we haven’t resolved yet is, when we come to consider accredited knowledge for regulation and registration, whether it has to be through a nationally recognised course or whether it can come from a number of courses which will need to be accredited by us.”

As the debate over qualifications for registration and regulation continues it is crucial that differences are ironed out so that those, like Zoë Jones, will be able to develop their careers as they wish.

Ms Andalo is a freelance journalist