

Pushing the boundaries – an interview with Darren Leech

By DEBBIE ANDALO

Darren Leech is the president of the Association of Pharmacy Technicians UK.

Here, he discusses his career to date, and sets out his vision of the role of pharmacy technicians in the future

Each post Darren Leech has applied for has cracked the professional boundaries which have traditionally separated pharmacy technicians and pharmacists. His determination to overcome barriers makes him ideally placed to lead pharmacy technicians through the most significant changes the profession has ever seen. As newly elected president of the Association of Pharmacy Technicians UK, he has the responsibility of steering his 2,000 members through the introduction of registration and regulation.

Mr Leech, who succeeded a pharmacist when he took up his present post as associate director of pharmacy, at King's College Hospital NHS Trust in South London, says it is a challenge he is relishing and is keen to see through to the end. He said: "There is potential for me to be re-elected after my two year term of office expires. I think it would be helpful for pharmacy technicians if there was continuity but whether that will be me or another member of the executive team only time will tell – but I have no desire to duck out."

His reluctance to shirk from a challenge has influenced progress up his own career ladder over the last 14 years since he started as a 16-year-old student pharmacy technician at the Queen Alexandra Hospital in Portsmouth, Hampshire. He applied for the post because he was interested in science and pharmacy and believed it would give him the chance to study and learn the job at the same time. "I did at one point, for a very short time, consider training as a pharmacist but in a way I am glad I decided not to. I don't think not being a pharmacist has inhibited my career in any way. In fact I think today I have more responsibility than I ever envisaged a pharmacy technician having."

After qualifying as a technician, he stayed at the Queen Alexandra for nearly three

years when he realised he would have to move on if he wanted a more senior post. By then he was 21 and wanted to travel so took up a post as a senior technician in a hospital in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. "It was just after the first Gulf war. Because the King lived in Jeddah the pharmacy had to be open 24-hours a day in case he or a member of his family became ill. One of my colleagues there was a Nigerian Prince."

He added: "The whole experience broadened my horizons a lot. The culture there was completely different to that which I had been used to. This made me realise that just because something has always been done a certain way it doesn't mean it is the best and most effective way to do things."

When his contract expired he took the chance to travel the Far East before returning to the UK a year later to take up a series of locum posts in the West Country. "Sadly nothing had changed in pharmacy since I had been away," he said. He then took up a post as a senior pharmacy technician at Frimley Park Hospital in Surrey. "The post gave me my first opportunity to have a say in the way things were done. I was involved in the management of the dispensary, which meant that I could say whether something was a good idea or not. I would like to think that during my time there I made a difference. It was all about opening doors. I realised then that if you present people in pharmacy with rational arguments for change it is difficult for them to object. I also discovered that you have to work within the system in order to change it."

CHALLENGING TRADITIONS

It was at this time that he began to challenge the traditional role of a pharmacy technician. He successfully applied for the job of dispensary manager at the William Harvey Hospital in Ashford Kent – a post in the past which had traditionally been held by a qualified pharmacist. "I felt with my

appointment that we could do some really good things. We set a real precedent about how pharmacy services should be run and delivered." A reorganisation brought the pharmacy team out of the dispensary and onto the wards. He said: "We called it a patient directed pharmacy service – we put everybody who didn't need to be in the pharmacy out on the wards. The dispensary was run by technicians with pharmacists screening work on the wards before it went to the dispensary." The model reflects the government's vision today of the way it wants to see hospital pharmacy services developed. "I think we were well ahead of our time at the William Harvey – a lot of people visited us to see what we were doing because they had heard that we had pharmacists and technicians out on the wards. The technicians acted as a filter and directed the pharmacists to where they were needed most. It wasn't a question of the technicians giving orders." He added: "It was more like they were saying to the pharmacists – I have worked these things out and gone as far as I can on my own, now I need your help to sort this out."

His experience at the William Harvey threw him into the spot light and he became a national officer for the Association of Pharmacy Technicians UK. "I suppose I took on the responsibility because of the local and national recognition we had received at the William Harvey. I think my experience at Ashford taught me that as a profession we weren't really very good at selling ourselves or making the contribution to pharmacy that we could. I realised that we needed a really effective pharmacy technician body to promote best practice because there has been so much reinventing the wheel going on."

Mr Leech moved on from the William Harvey when a fresh challenge presented itself. He became responsible for developing education and training packages for qualified pharmacy technicians across the London region. He also ran study days for newly

Ms Andalo is a freelance journalist

appointed pharmacy managers. "I had just completed my diploma in management studies and the study days meant I gave people, newly promoted to managerial posts, the opportunity to question what they were doing. I was also chair of the Association and I found the post in education and training good for developing networks across the region and nationally. I was then in a post which was the most senior post that a technician could have. I have always been trying to break through the glass ceiling. Many of my jobs have had a pharmacist in post before me. I think if you have a pharmacy manager it doesn't matter if that person is a pharmacist or a technician so long as they have the knowledge and skills to run the service."

Still determined to challenge traditional roles within pharmacy, Mr Leech completed a Masters in Business Administration. "I knew that if I wanted to work at director level in pharmacy I would need that qualifi-

cation. I was aiming at that time to make myself a candidate who was difficult not to appoint," he admitted. Two years ago he left his regional training and educational post to take up his current role at King's where he is responsible for all patient services within pharmacy including out-patients. He is also in charge of the department's 98 staff when the director is away.

He believes he would not have that same level of responsibility today if he had decided on a different career path as a teenager and trained as a pharmacist. He said: "If I had been a pharmacist I think my career would have taken an easier route. But I don't think I would have been in this position as a pharmacist at my age. The reason that I am here in this job is that I have more than 14 years experience in hospital pharmacy in a variety of different settings. I also have the relevant knowledge and skills that are needed to deliver a service.

You don't need to know which drugs are developed from which tree bark in order to run an effective pharmacy service." Mr Leech is convinced that in the future a suitably experienced pharmacy technician could become a director of pharmacy. The development of registration for technicians and regulation will only increase their chances of taking on new roles and responsibilities, he believes. He said: "I see no reason why a technician should not become a director of pharmacy – the qualities needed to do that job well are managerial and are not necessarily related to clinical knowledge."

TECHNICIAN REGISTRATION

Mr Leech is a keen supporter of professional regulation and registration. "We have been pressing for regulation for the last 50 years for technicians to be recognised and

Advertisement

registered to a standard. It hasn't happened before because the timing has not been right. The political will is now there for a variety of different reasons. I have always had difficulty arguing against regulation and registration. I think that technicians will feel a lot happier and a lot more confident knowing they are registered professionals in their own right and accountable for their actions." He supports the principle of a register for technicians and is determined to see it linked to "clear and unambiguous standards". Mr Leech warned there is potential for concern over the "grandparenting" clause which will allow technicians with long experience, but lacking appropriate qualifications, to belong to the register. But he is optimistic that any hurdles can be overcome. He said: "I am confident that when the Royal Pharmaceutical Society Council makes its decision that it will be an inclusive, rather than exclusive one. The setting of a

professional standard by 2007 I think is a line in the sand. He added: "After 2007, all technicians on the register will have to demonstrate continuing standards of practice. One of the problems is that people are thinking about 2007 and not beyond. If you look at the pharmacists there are those without degrees on the register. Their register has evolved and the standard of entry has improved over the years – maybe that is something which will happen with the technicians' register."

FACING A WATERSHED

Pharmacy technicians are undoubtedly facing a watershed. If they have the confidence to take on the new roles and responsibilities which lie ahead there is little doubt that their new president will be behind them all the way. He wants to help forge a path for the profession which will

allow those with ambition to succeed right to the top and take on the roles which have traditionally been at the door of chief pharmacists. But at the end of the day their success will depend on their own vision – regardless of what opportunities the association creates. Mr Leech had this advice for technicians as they stand at today's crossroads: "It's up to the technicians to generate the opportunities. Some don't grasp the opportunities when they happen or they fail to see them – they expect to be spoon-fed. Sometimes you have to be prepared to move and change to get to the top of your career." It's the same sound advice that he has followed which has brought him to the top of his profession in just over a decade.

Visit www.aptuk.org for details about the Association of Pharmacy Technicians UK