

# There are advantages and disadvantages to being a locum pharmacist

By John R. Wood

Many pharmacists are choosing to work as locums instead of as managers in pharmacies around the United Kingdom. Large multiples are suffering from this phenomenon to the detriment of continuity in their branches. I doubt if any chain would actually choose to run its pharmacies with locums and yet these chains do not seem to be asking themselves why this is happening.

After 15 years of managing pharmacies for a large multiple I took early retirement. I was stale, I was jaded and I felt I had had enough. After a complete year away from pharmacy I decided to try some locum work before I completely lost touch. At first my self-assurance was low, but after working a few days, spread well apart, I knew my former confidence was returning. My first few days were back at the branch I had managed for nine years, but soon I was asking to work at another location, something I had not done for 10 years. Then I booked a regular day with a privately owned pharmacy in addition to my other commitment.

After some nine months I am enjoying the days I work, though I admit the greatest feeling of satisfaction comes at the end of the day. But why should this be? What is so different? In one location I have even been working with the same staff in the same pharmacy... but it is not the same as before. I have tried to analyse my situation, and in doing so have reached conclusions that may only apply to myself. But I do believe that I cannot be alone in this and that the same factors probably influence others.

I can choose when I work, and knowing I have made the decision to work a particular day, I know I am controlling my life; the job is not controlling me.

I do not have to worry about the staffing level in the branch because it is no longer my responsibility. If a customer walks out of the pharmacy because all the staff are engaged, I no longer feel the pain of failure as I formally did. I now see it as a failure of the company instead. The staffing levels

were always dictated to us anyway, but I was made to feel responsible if anything went wrong, and it hurt and worried me.

Head office "interference" is no longer my concern. The area manager passing on the instruction (from some unknown and hated source) that the pharmacy should be signing up 40 new patients for the collection service every week or day or hour (it hardly matters which), no longer stings me into a state of bitter resentment. (I should point out this particular branch had been assiduously signing up patients for three years.) I can let it flow past me as a management whim, and not take it as a personal insult to my own abilities.

As one of the staff suggested, the only way we could achieve what was demanded would be to stand outside the pharmacies of our competitors and sign up their customers. It is thoughtlessness like that which I am thankful to be without.

One occurrence typifies my change of feelings. A message on the answerphone: "Can I do an extra day/ please phone back. Please do Wednesday/ really desperate/I know you are doing Monday/Tuesday/ Thursday but please." And I say yes with a glow of pleasure, knowing I am wanted. Four days on the trot — so what! — I can do it. And this is retirement? Compare this with going to managers' meetings 7.30pm to 10pm on my day off — total and utter resentment and the conviction afterwards that it was a waste of time. No thank you!

I find working in different locations, with different people to be stimulating. Also working with new systems and experiencing alternative methods of approaching problems is refreshing.

There are some disadvantages to working odd days. There is a lack of continuity in the sense that matters are not always carried to their conclusion in a single day. This entails quite lengthy messages being left, and the hope that this will be enough. Sometimes problems from the previous day have not been resolved, and the matter has to be approached from the beginning all over again. But most locums seem to be

aware of this, and the flow of information is usually, though not always, good.

Would I be better off financially working full time as a locum rather than as a manager? The answer has got to be no. Extrapolating my finishing salary to figure A and multiplying the number of hours I used to work a year by my present hourly rate as a locum to figure B, I find A is bigger than B. The difference could be made up if I worked all the weeks and days that I used to get as holiday. In other words there is an inbuilt financial advantage in working as a manager, you get paid for your holidays, which is worth in the region of 14 per cent. And do not forget the company's contribution to your pension.

So with this built-in advantage, why are companies not filling their managerial vacancies? It is true that there is a shortage of pharmacists. But these pharmacies are not closing, the prescriptions are not being turned away, and there are pharmacists in there almost every day. So there could be more manager vacancies filled.

One of the major problems is that large companies are driven by commercial necessities, which, when brought through the management chain to the level of the pharmacist, seem to him or her to bear no relationship to what is most important in the dispensary. Branch business plans and genuine customer care from a caring pharmacist often do not make for a happy partnership.

I know we all have to make money, but commercial pressure on pharmacists runs contrary to the professional role they seek to fulfil, and to what the public now expects from them.

I do not have the answers, but I am not sure the companies are even aware there is problem. I believe they need to build a new and more caring relationship with their pharmacists, bringing them into a partnership of trust with the company, instead of harassing them to distraction.

*I can choose when I work, and knowing I have made the decision to work a particular day, I know I am controlling my life; the job is not controlling me*

*Branch business plans and genuine customer care from a caring pharmacist often do not make for a happy partnership*

Mr Wood is a locum pharmacist from Tamworth, Staffordshire

BROAD SPECTRUM

The "Broad Spectrum" feature is open to any writer. Contributions of around 1,200 words, commenting on topics of current interest, should be sent to assistant editor Graeme Smith (e-mail [graeme.smith@pharmj.org.uk](mailto:graeme.smith@pharmj.org.uk)) for consideration.