

One man's career advice — make your own luck

Andy Murdock was
interviewed by Dawn
Connelly

Andy Murdock is director of pharmacy and superintendent pharmacist at Lloydspharmacy, but what route did he follow to get to where he is today?

Andy stumbled into pharmacy almost by accident. At the age of 14 he attended a careers interview and was surprised to find that he was strongly suited to a career in pharmacy. At this point Andy had no intention of going to university, however, several years later while studying for A levels, a friend persuaded him to apply. He was reminded of the careers interview and decided to apply for pharmacy — the rest is history.

Andy studied at Nottingham University from 1976–79. He enjoyed the course and was particularly interested in pharmaceuticals. “In fact, I won the Sandoz prize for pharmaceuticals — the princely sum of £15,” he says.

Preregistration training

Because of Andy's interest in pharmaceuticals he applied for, and obtained, a preregistration training placement that was split between hospital and industry. He spent six months at the London Hospital, Whitechapel, and six months at what was then the Wellcome Foundation, based in Dartford, Kent. After completing his preregistration training Andy decided that he was more interested in the industry side of things and stayed on with the Wellcome Foundation, working in solid dosage formulation and research, for a further two years.

In 1982, Andy decided that his career was not progressing as quickly as he would like and made the move into community pharmacy. “That was a big leap for me because I was very industry orientated. Once I had made that mental leap it was just a matter of deciding where in the country I wanted to work.”

A change of direction

Andy's first job in the community sector was as manager and superintendent pharmacist of a two-shop chain in Chard, Somerset. He received most of his training in running a pharmacy business here. "The owner and his accountant taught me all I needed to learn about human resources, book keeping, VAT, tax and wages." The pharmacy was in a relatively small market town, which meant that Andy got to know his patients well and developed good relationships with the local general practitioners. During his time in Chard, among other things, Andy introduced computers to the pharmacy and started up a blood pressure monitoring programme.

"In the 1980s pharmacy was changing a little more slowly than it is now and it was incumbent upon the profession to try to offer a better service. Offering blood pressure monitoring in a community pharmacy at that time was pretty revolutionary," he said.

Andy stayed in this job for 11 years, until the company he was working for was bought by AAH Retail Pharmacy and began operating under the banner of Hills Pharmacy.

"The Hills opportunity allowed me to move to Highbridge, Somerset, where Hills had just bought a health centre pharmacy. I was sent in to set it up from scratch, which was an interesting experience."

Eighteen months later Andy moved down to Taunton to introduce company systems to another, busier, health centre pharmacy that had recently been purchased by Hills.

Shortly after that, in October 1995, he was asked to move to Hills Pharmacy's head office in Hook, Hampshire, as pharmacy services manager.

"This role covered complaints handling, legal aspects of NHS contracts, liaising

with health authorities, service development, information technology, training for preregistration trainees and technical support for head office staff."

During this time AAH was taken over by GEHE, which subsequently acquired the Lloyds Chemists chain.

Current role

In May 1997, Andy became director of pharmacy and superintendent pharmacist for the retail pharmacy division of the merged Hills Pharmacy/Lloyds Chemists business. When he was offered the position he was called into the managing director's office and asked: "Do you think you can do it?". He replied: "I haven't got a clue but I would be a fool if I didn't give it a go." Andy reflects that just two years earlier he had been putting tablets in bottles and talking to patients. "This was not an acute learning curve, it was an obtuse learning curve, and a pretty meteoric rise to fame."

Andy currently has two titles and hence two roles. One is as superintendent pharmacist and all the legal and professional responsibilities that go with that, and the other is as director of pharmacy, which centres around service and IT development. Andy says that he has to rely on an exceedingly good team in order to be able to carry out these roles.

An additional element of his job as director of pharmacy is sitting on the boards of various organisations, for example, the Company Chemists Association, the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee, the National Pharmaceutical Association and the Pharmacy Healthcare Scheme.

"You can put your 10 penn'orth into the debate through these organisations," says Andy.

In addition, he plays a political role through interfacing with the Government. Andy is also an external advisor for the

pharmacy degree curriculum at Bradford University.

If Andy has to choose a low point in his career, it is when he was turned down for a job as a pharmaceutical adviser in Somerset. At the time he was incredibly disappointed but 18 months later he landed the job of superintendent pharmacist. As far as high points go, he thinks the best is yet to come. "I am incredibly fortunate to be doing what I am doing now, and that is quite a high . . . but as far as a stamp on the pharmaceutical world goes — watch this space."

But given the chance, would he do anything differently? "No, I have never really planned my career, I have been quite fortunate in some respects in being in the right place at the right time. Some would say you make your own luck and through the work you do you bring yourself to peoples' attention . . . and I think there has been an element of that about my career."

There is still a huge amount that Andy would like to do.

"From the wider pharmacy professional side of things, I would like to think I can play my part in getting things sorted out because I think it is a bit of a mess at the moment. Obviously I will continue to work from the company perspective in making sure we are successful."

Andy is also interested in public health and if he had the time would love to gain a qualification in this area.

"Don't be disillusioned — it's not as bad as people make it out to be," is the message that Andy would like to get across to students who are just starting out. "There is a lot to do and people can make an impact if they get on and do it." Andy's advice is: if you are passionate about something then let people know and do something about it. ✕