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A day in the life of a *PJ* reporter

Variety is the best thing about being a *PJ* reporter. It also makes describing “a day in the life” hard. The highlights of the job are going out to meetings and press conferences, and visiting pharmacies. But even in an office-based week, there is a wide range of things to do.

Press day

The *PJ* week is centred on Wednesdays. This is our press day and 5pm, which is the deadline for pages to be sent to press, marks our equivalent of “Friday night” — except that we have to go to work on Thursday mornings. However, the fact that the start of the week is quite pressured and Thursday and Friday are more relaxed is a good way to work. No matter what you are doing, you are always aiming to get it done in time for going to press on Wednesday.

My job mainly involves writing news and news features. News features are longer and provide a more detailed look at a particular issue. An average office-

based day would involve a combination of researching and writing news, answering telephone calls and e-mails, and trying to keep up to date with everything that is happening in pharmacy by talking to people and reading (other journals, documents, internet sites, etc).

News

News has lots of different sources. Some comes to us on a plate: press releases sent by e-mail, fax or post. Other news requires more work, for example someone might telephone to tell us about something that we then have to research. Most of the time, it is somewhere in between. Press releases rarely provide all the information we need, and for most stories, we have to find someone to comment. If a story is particularly controversial then finding someone who is prepared to comment “on the record” (ie, to be quoted) can be hard work. Much of the clinical news comes from reading medical journals, such as the *BMJ* or the *Lancet*.

Press conferences, held mostly by pharmaceutical companies, but also by

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pharmacy organisations and government departments, for example, are a good source of news. So not all news is the same: one story might be done and dusted in half an hour but another might take five minutes of research a day for several weeks before you finally get to the bottom of it.

News features

News features require more work than news stories. For a start, you need to write more words. The same types of source, such as a press release about a new initiative, can trigger a feature. But news features take a more in-depth look at something. To get this you might visit a pharmacy that is piloting a new service, interview somebody, or telephone five or 10 people to get a wider, more detailed perspective than the one or two comments that a news story might include.

Conferences

Reporting from conferences is another part of the job. Conferences vary in size — from 20 people to 20,000 people

— and in topic. One week you might find yourself listening to a detailed clinical description of some new research and the next, a political debate. Some conferences are specifically about pharmacy, such as the British Pharmaceutical Conference. Others have a wider content so part of the reporting job is to search out the pharmacy-related stories. Conferences are always hectic. This is particularly true if you are submitting text to be included in that week's *PJ*. Even if you are reporting for the following week's issue, it is normal to write much of the report in the evenings after the conference sessions have ended. So most days at conferences are long ones. Sometimes there are conference dinners in the evenings which provide a good opportunity to catch up with people and to find out what is going on in the pharmacy world.

Travelling

One of the perks of the job is travelling. Conferences can be held in exotic places and most of the *PJ* staff go abroad for work once a year. This can work out pretty well if you manage to tie a few days

of holiday on to the end of a conference, otherwise there is not much chance of seeing more than the inside of the conference hall and hotel room. It is not all glamour, though; there are plenty of trips to less exciting places too.

And then there are the horror stories. Every one of us has had a disaster of sorts on a work trip abroad. Mine was in Croatia a couple of years ago when I returned to my hotel room to find all my possessions gone. I telephoned the hotel reception to be told that, no, I had not been robbed and I must stay there until a staff member came to the room. On no account was I to go into the bathroom. Obviously the first thing I did was open the bathroom door. A nightmare scene greeted me. The toilet appeared to have exploded and left a fine spray of sewage covering everything. I shut the door quickly. The staff member said there had been "a small problem" in the bathroom (I would loved to have seen a big problem) and consequently they had moved me to another room. Friends in the hotel industry have since told me that stories of pressure build-up on plumbing systems in large hotels resulting in explosions are notorious, but noone ever believed they were true. It would seem that they are.

Hard work

Going to interesting places, meeting different people and being aware of what's going on in pharmacy are what makes the job so fascinating. But it can be hard work. It is not a nine-to-five job: Tuesday evenings are guaranteed to be late, and meetings at evenings and weekends are part of the deal. There are certainly times on cold, rainy evenings when you would really rather be heading home than tramping off to a meeting. And sometimes, no matter how many times you telephone someone for a quote, they are late getting back to you and so you end up being up against a tight deadline to get an article finished. On balance though, the positives far outweigh the negatives. ³