

# A week in the life of an academic pharmacist

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You may wonder what your lecturers do when they are not teaching you. Susan Matthews describes a typical working week

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**T**he working week starts with a teaching morning; enlightening the second year students on the usefulness of nuclear magnetic resonance and introducing the first years to addition mechanisms. Lectures are never the same and material can work wonderfully for one set of students but not strike a chord with another, so I am always looking for new approaches to teaching my subject. It is important when teaching chemistry to show the relevance of the subject to pharmacy by linking in pharmaceutical examples. I find that workshops and tutorials are a good way of achieving this.

Lunch is, unfortunately, a working one. I am the chairman of our staff-student liaison committee (SSLC) and today it is the turn of four representatives from the first year to give us some feedback on how they think the course is going. Since we are a new school of pharmacy, we find their views useful and they impact considerably on our curriculum design. Usually I have a fair idea of what sort of problems might arise, such as with teaching rooms and the timetable, but I do get some surprises and it is particularly gratifying when the students compliment a lecturer or a course. Also, I find it impressive how astute the students are in knowing which aspects can be changed and which cannot, for example when it is beyond the school's control.

Most of the afternoon is taken up preparing teaching materials. A lecture can take up to two days to write if it is a completely new subject or as little as one hour if it is material you have covered before. I have been teaching for four years, after spending a number of years as a postdoctoral fellow in laboratories around Europe; the preparation time for lectures decreases a lot as I gain experience. Apart from that, I try to deal with any minor issues raised in the SSLC or find someone, or a university committee, to which to refer the more difficult ones.

## Tuesday

**T**his is a fairly similar day to Monday, with most of my time spent teaching or preparing new material. I have an enjoyable lunch discussing the possibility of a joint research application with a colleague from the chemistry sector of the school and filling each other in on the latest school gossip.

Come the evening, it is time for a committee meeting of the local branch of the Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC), where we are planning the events calendar for the next year. I was elected to the committee to foster links between the RSC and the local branch of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society and we are hoping to arrange a joint meeting on a pharmaceuticals topic later in the year.

## Wednesday

During the admissions season, every other Wednesday is an interview day for prospective students, and this is one of them. My main administrative role is as head of admissions for pharmacy, which means that I help the admissions officer in deciding which students we invite to interview and what offers are made. I also help with schools liaison and outreach events.

These days are busy. By 11am, applicants and their parents are arriving and, while they are waiting for presentations about the school and tours of the facilities and the University of East Anglia campus, I am on hand to answer any questions they have about the course, the university and Norwich. That has been a bit of a steep learning curve for me, particularly since the first time I came to Norwich was for my job interview. In the afternoon, along with my other colleagues, I will interview some of the candidates and find out why they want to do a degree in pharmacy.

Wednesday is also the day for the school colloquium, where an academic from another university speaks about their research. So it all gets a bit manic as I run away to the lecture theatre at 4pm to hear him.

## Thursday

I do almost all my teaching in the first semester, which gives me the whole of the second semester to concentrate on my research; this is the most important and enjoyable part of my work. Even so, this semester I do not have any teaching on a Thursday, which means I can dedicate the day to my postgraduate students and the laboratory.

I have four postgraduates in my research group, all in varying stages of their PhDs. They are working on a variety of projects, including preparing new contrast agents for magnetic resonance imaging, tissue engineering scaffolds and drug delivery systems. So, although I teach medicinal chemistry, my research is more in the area of pharmaceuticals. I try to pop into the laboratory and deal with problems every day but in reality a lot of Thursday



is spent talking to the postgraduates about how their work is progressing, looking at data, planning ahead and sorting out niggles with equipment. The rest of the time is spent preparing new research proposals for funding and doing experiments in the laboratory myself (though the postgraduates do not like this).

Lunchtime is always spent at the Synthesis Colloquium (a group of researchers in organic and inorganic chemistry from across the school) where postgraduates present half hour talks on their research. This is really good for finding out what everyone is doing and getting ideas for your own research. Today it is one of my students presenting so it is nerve-wracking because I really want her to do well and feel protective about her work.

## Friday

So to the end of the week. My Friday mornings are quiet, which gives me an opportunity to catch up on the administrative work that has piled up and to read some journals. At midday, I have a first year tutorial, which is my teaching highlight of the week since I get to know the individual students, help them if they

are having some difficulties and get direct feedback on how the lectures are going.

I only have time to grab a quick lunch before dashing to the laboratory for an afternoon demonstrating to the medicinal chemistry class. This is a new set of practicals that I designed with my postgraduates over the summer. For the first few weeks, it was a bit daunting. We knew that the experiments worked for us in our research laboratory but how well would they transfer to a class of 40 undergraduates? It turns out to be a relaxed afternoon. The students work on a circuit so we now know any pitfalls of the experiments and can head students off if they are going in the wrong direction. We also get a chance to chat to them. Thankfully the students want the weekend as much as I do so they are always trying to be gone before five and I can get on my way too.

So you could never call the work of an academic pharmacist dull. It is infinitely varied and offers an amazing amount of freedom in developing your career into the perfect one for you, be it teaching, research or even administration. ✂