

Pharmacy pathways: which one will you take?

By Trudy Thomas



Pharmacy graduates of today face a wide range of career options. An increasing number of pharmacists are choosing to work in primary care and many are seeking portfolio careers involving work across one or more of the pharmacy sectors. In the near future, due to changes in the law, pharmacists will also be able to prescribe independently.

Community pharmacy

The community sector still employs more pharmacists than any other. The trend in recent years has been for pharmacists to become employees of large companies or to be self-employed locums. However there are still an estimated 7,000 independent pharmacy businesses. For those pharmacists interested in the business side of pharmacy, the large companies offer structured careers, with promotion into management. Pharmacists who wish to concentrate on the professional side can also find positions to suit their interests. Many large companies will support employees wishing to undertake postgraduate qualifications.

There are opportunities for high patient contact, with responding to symptoms, counter prescribing and health promotion featuring as key activities. Many community pharmacies are already working with local primary care trusts (PCTs) on projects such as minor ailments schemes, supply of medicines through patient group directions, services to care homes and repeat dispensing.

Community pharmacy can offer flexible working arrangements to accommodate family commitments etc. Salaries tend to be higher in community than in other

sectors. Employee pharmacists may receive other bonuses such as private health care, Royal Pharmaceutical Society fees or paid study leave.

The downside of community work is that it can be reactive and at times pressured, often with long hours and non-existent lunch breaks. Community pharmacists sometimes work in isolation, with few support staff. Self-employed locums must secure work, although agencies can help with this. Self-employed pharmacists must also make arrangements for the running of a small business including organising their own tax payments, national insurance and sick pay.

Hospital pharmacy

Hospital pharmacists work in both private and NHS hospitals. Patient contact is high and clinical activities are at the fore. A and B grade posts — the lowest paid — are often rotational, which means that the employee moves around the different hospital sections to gain experience in all aspects of hospital pharmacy. C and D grade posts usually involve some degree of specialisation, eg, radiopharmaceuticals, medicines information, mental health, oncology services, manufacturing and quality control.

Dispensing activities for in- and outpatients are usually undertaken by a regular team, with other pharmacists required to cover dispensing activities on a rota basis. The advantages of working in hospital pharmacy are that flexible working arrangements, part-time and job-sharing are encouraged, with career breaks possible within the NHS in some circumstances. Some hospitals include

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on-site child-care. Careers structures exist and staff development is usually good with staff often being given on the job study time. Hospitals employ good support staff, including highly trained technicians and pharmacy assistants. However, high numbers of staff vacancies for pharmacists and technicians can mean everyone is working under extra pressure. On-call duties are an integral part of many hospital positions.

Industrial pharmacy

Approximately 1,000 pharmacists work in the pharmaceutical and cosmetic industries. Graduates who start in industry are often required to have a good degree. However it is possible for pharmacists from other sectors to move into industry.

Pharmacists may be employed in development, quality assurance, production, registration, marketing or research. Opportunities also exist in clinical trials as well as sales and medicines information. It is usual for industrial pharmacists to move around within these specialties as their career progresses. Pharmacists involved in manufacture or quality assurance may have the opportunity to attain Qualified Person (QP) status, enabling them to take responsibility for the final "sign off" of materials before release.

A career structure is possible within the industry and there may be opportunities for travel. There may be perks working for larger organisations (eg, subsidised health care) and some flexibility of hours may be possible. However pharmacists may need to move around the country, either within one company or between companies, to further their career because the number of posts may be limited.

Primary care

Primary care trusts will usually have a number of pharmacists working as part of their prescribing teams. Some will have a strategic role, ie, budget setting, reporting to prescribing subgroups or other professional committees and prescribing plan development. Others have a more operational role, working with GP practices, eg, carrying out

clinical audit or medication review. Work within PCTs can be flexible, with many employing full and part-time pharmacists as well as offering sessional work. Some posts require a minimum of three years' post-registration experience. There may be a requirement for a postgraduate qualification to be undertaken to support the role. Work is varied and travel between sites is likely, however operational work may mean pharmacists have to work in isolation.

Academia

The number of schools of pharmacy is increasing, meaning more places are available in academia. Academic pharmacists tend to have or are studying for postgraduate qualifications.

The number of teacher practitioner roles has increased in the past 10 years. These pharmacists work at the interface between practice and academia. The time commitments between the two sectors vary depending on the contract between the university and the other partner, which may be a hospital, community, pharmaceutical company or primary care organisation.

Pharmacists are also involved in teaching technicians, other healthcare professionals and qualified pharmacists engaged in postgraduate studies.

Writing and editing

The pharmaceutical press, other medical and scientific journals and the lay press employ pharmacists as writers to carry out editorial work. Medical writing may also take the form of preparation of scientific papers and documents.

Writing and word-processing skills are required together with the ability to work to tight deadlines. While some travel to conferences and interviews may be required, these posts are largely office-based, often around London and the South East.

Other pharmacist posts

Prison pharmacy A number of pharmacists work in the prison service. Prison pharmacists are responsible for

the planning, co-ordination and delivery of pharmaceutical services to inmates. Dispensing and clinical "ward" services are involved.

Civil service There are about 100 posts within the civil service taken by pharmacists. These include scientific and administration posts within the Department of Health and assessors at the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. There are a number of posts for pharmacists within the armed forces.

Agricultural and veterinary pharmacy

There is a shortage of pharmacists within this specialisation. Some positions are available in specific agricultural and veterinary pharmacies, and also within the veterinary products industry.

Taking a break

The majority of career breaks are taken by women for domestic reasons. Career breaks need to be planned if a pharmacist wishes to maximise his or her career prospects. Some work places allow for an official career break. A woman can return to her original job after a break of up to five years. The return will be phased and will involve retraining.

Some women wish to return to work part time after their baby is born. The more flexible working within the community, hospital and primary care sectors may make these jobs attractive. Some large companies offer flexible parenting contracts.

Many employers are now switched on to job sharing. For the employer this offers the benefits of a mix of people skills. For the employees involved it can offer the chance to maintain a more senior post than if taking a part-time position.

The rapid pace of change within health care is bringing more choice for working and types of career for pharmacy graduates. There has never been a more exciting time to be a pharmacist. 