

Doing the write thing — a career as a pharmacy journalist

LOOKING for an out-of-the-ordinary job where you can use your knowledge and training as a pharmacist?

Are you NATURALLY INQUISITIVE? Do you like getting to the bottom of things and digging out answers to sometimes difficult and awkward questions?

Do you really enjoy WRITING and think you could do it for a living?

If so, PHARMACY JOURNALISM may be a path you want to take...

Although you are not likely to find the above advertisement when you are looking

for your first job after qualifying, or if you are looking to change direction after having tried hospital or community pharmacy for a while, opportunities do exist in pharmacy journalism. And, once you get your foot in, it can be an opening into the wider world of writing and journalism. Using my own experiences and those of other pharmacist writers I know, I will tell you about some of the opportunities open to you and how to get yourself into the editorial offices of pharmacy and other health-oriented journals. From there, if you want, you can go on into the wider field of popular health magazines and even the national press.

There are two ways you can make a living by writing in pharmacy — either by being employed as a journalist by a pharmacy journal or magazine or, as I have done, by becoming a freelance writer. Let us take a look at both.

Becoming a salaried journalist

One journal, *The Pharmaceutical Journal*, is a weekly publication and reaches all pharmacists. Added to that there are five weekly or monthly publications for community pharmacists and one monthly journal for hospital pharmacists (see box). From time to time these publications advertise journalist-type vacancies for pharmacists. The

advantages for budding writers are that they are usually looking for staff at a junior level, so do not require applicants to have previous journalistic experience, and provide thorough training. The disadvantage is that because they have relatively small number of writers on staff, recruitment advertisements are fairly few and far between. However, if you are really enthusiastic about a career in writing you could be pro-active and bring yourself to the notice of editors by sending in a piece you have written, and perhaps asking for some work experience. This opportunity may not always be available and you are not likely to be paid even if it is. However, you may be lucky enough to get a week or two in a magazine office to find out what pharmacy journalism is about and to discover whether you like the job and have what it takes to be a journalist.

Working as a journalist on a pharmacy publication can also be the way into other exciting careers. I know one pharmacist who started out as a “cub reporter” on *Chemist & Druggist*, and within a few years was health correspondent for a national newspaper. Another now runs her own media company, while others have branched out into successful freelance journalism. Journalism is also a good occupation for pharmacists with young children to look after because, thanks to electronic communication and the information resources provided through the internet, much of the work can be done without having to go outside your front door. Several pharmacy journalists I know have retired from full-

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time work after having a baby but continue to work from home, either part-time or as freelancers.

Being a freelance journalist

A way of earning all or part of your income as a pharmacist is as a freelance journalist or writer. The advantage of being a “freelancer” is that you have the freedom to organise your working life as you want, subject only to having to meet deadlines for the submission of articles. You can also continue to work in another sphere of pharmacy while building up your experience and reputation as a writer. And, if you want to, you can continue to divide your career between writing and working as a practising pharmacist, perhaps as a locum. Doing this also provides something to fall back on if the writing work dries up for a while. The disadvantage of freelance writing is that there is no guarantee of work or pay, as you are dependent on your reputation and on the availability of work. That is why it is a good idea to have some other source of income, such as working as a locum, as a fall back. It is probably a good idea, anyway, to have a couple of years of pharmacy practice experience behind you to give you a good background knowledge of the profession before starting on a journalistic career, either as an employee or “freelancer”.

So, how do you start out as a “freelancer”? Well, you could do as I did. I started about 20 years ago, after selling my community pharmacy businesses. I was working as a locum and found myself with a bit more spare time. I had always enjoyed writing and had written articles for student and club newsletters and magazines, but I had never written anything for money and decided it was time to have a try. I wrote a piece “on spec” and sent it to the editor of a free monthly pharmacy magazine. He got back to me and said that he liked the article but could not use it; instead he offered me the chance to write on a topic that he wanted covered. I wrote the article, he accepted it, it was published and he gave me regular work after that. Things grew from there.

It is particularly useful to have an area in which you specialise and perhaps

become an expert. My specialty is the treatment of minor ailments and over-the-counter medicines, and this has led on to all kinds of writing work and “spin-offs”. I have written several series of articles for pharmacy and nursing periodicals, plus the occasional piece for GP publications. One series, in *The Pharmaceutical Journal*, led to me writing a book — ‘Non-prescription medicines’ (Pharmaceutical Press) — for which I am currently preparing the third edition. Once you have a reputation as an expert, the word spreads and things can really snowball, as they have done for me. Some of the “spin-offs” have been a column with my by-line in *Eve* magazine and being a consultant on minor ailments for *Men’s Health*. I am also an adviser to the Proprietary Association of Great Britain, the representative organisation for the manufacturers of OTC medicines. In this role I have provided advice on winter ailments and hay fever for its Consumer Health Information Centre (CHIC), written consumer leaflets on treating minor ailments and on the safe use of OTC medicines, helped to rewrite the material for the CHIC website, given radio interviews (I once did 15 in a morning to local stations and have been on BBC Radio 4’s *You and Yours* programme) and interviewed other journalists. Being an expert can also lead to being invited onto the editorial boards of magazines, which advise the editor and help to plan the content of future issues. I currently serve on three of these.

Specialisation can be useful, but to be a successful freelance writer you really need to be an all-rounder and prepared to write on any subject you are asked to. I have written on many topics, including community and primary care pharmacy, professional issues, law and ethics, and clinical pharmacy. Of course, I have to research most of the information, but there has to be an underlying core of knowledge and understanding of pharmacy, and that is why gaining experience in the profession before starting on a writing career is so important.

So, if you are passionate about writing and want to do a job that uses both your pharmacy knowledge and writing skill, write something that you think you can be proud of and use it to sell yourself to the

editors of the pharmacy periodicals. Because, as the 19th century poet John Keats, who trained as an apothecary (pharmacist or GP in those times) wrote: “Fine writing, is next to fine doing, the top thing in the world.” ¹

Pharmacy periodicals

The Pharmaceutical Journal. *The official journal of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain. It is published weekly and is sent free to all registered pharmacists and pharmacy technicians. It combines news coverage with research papers, continuing education articles to help pharmacists with their continuing professional development and official news of the Society.*

Chemist & Druggist. *A weekly publication for community pharmacists, available through subscription, and just about every community pharmacy subscribes. Its focus is community pharmacy news and issues and it also provides continuing professional development articles. It publishes a monthly magazine – Over the Counter – for pharmacy assistants.*

Pharmacy Magazine. *One of four monthly magazines sent free to community pharmacies. It is sent to all pharmacies and a magazine for assistants – Training Matters – goes out with it.*

Community Pharmacy. *This is a sister publication of Chemist & Druggist and is also sent free to all community pharmacies.*

Independent Community Pharmacist. *This is free but sent to independent pharmacies only (ie, not to large multiples like Boots, Alliance and Lloyds). It is published by the same group (Communications International) as Pharmacy Magazine.*

Pharmacy Products Review. *Sent out free each month to all community pharmacies. Another Communications International publication.*

Hospital Pharmacist. *A monthly publication from the same office as The Pharmaceutical Journal. It is sent free to all hospital pharmacists.*