



Locum motion

After you register you may be interested in practising as a locum. Pamela Mason shows you how to get going

Even a cursory look at the recruitment pages of *The Pharmaceutical Journal* will tell you just how many opportunities there are for pharmacists to work as locums. Locums provide nearly 40 per cent of the community pharmacy workforce. When you first qualify, working as a locum can be an interesting and challenging way of gaining experience in the different sectors of the profession and learning from different methods of practice. It also offers variety and flexibility — which you might well enjoy for the rest of your working life. Alternatively, doing locum work may help you to decide whether you want to commit yourself for a period to working in one branch of pharmacy.

Be careful about starting locum work before you feel ready to do so. Travelling to different places, getting used to unfamiliar systems and working with new people can be daunting, particularly if you are not confident in the basics of looking after a pharmacy. Be particularly careful about the places where you first accept work. If, for example, you are unused to practising in a deprived inner city area, you could find it stressful to deal with drug misusers. Equally, if your experience has been in a poorer area, you might find that a wealthy district — which may have demanding patients of a different type — difficult to cope with. Aim to increase your confidence on more familiar ground.

How to get work

When you are starting out as a locum, the easiest way to get work is often through a locum agency. Most of these advertise in *The Pharmaceutical Journal* (go to www.pjcareers.com). You will also find a number of them through use of a search engine on the internet and some encourage on-line registration. However, if you accept work at a pharmacy through an agency, that agency will not like it if you then accept work privately with the same pharmacy. Occasionally agencies may try to tie you to working for them alone, so listen carefully to what is said to you and look at the “small print” in any written material.

If you do not want to use an agency, visit pharmacies where you think you would like to work and introduce yourself. If you have no locum experience, be prepared to offer to spend some unpaid time in the pharmacy to be shown the dispensary, the computer and to be introduced to the staff. This is also a useful way of assessing whether you think the pharmacy is for you. For example, are there adequate numbers of well-trained staff and is the dispensary clean, tidy and well-laid out? What hours are you expected to work, including lunchtimes, and what are your responsibilities?

Royal Pharmaceutical Society branch meetings, local Centre for Pharmacy Postgraduate Education workshops and pharmacy development groups are also useful ways to make contacts. You might consider developing your own website to advertise your locum services.

When you have made a booking — either verbally or in writing — you and the pharmacy proprietor have made a binding contract. If, having made the arrangement, you find you are unavailable, you must contact the proprietor immediately. Equally if a proprietor cancels at short notice and you are unable to find work, you can seek redress, but I would not want to recommend this unless it happens regularly with one pharmacy. In any case, it is usually not difficult to find replacement work.

What are your responsibilities?

As a locum your professional responsibilities are the same as those of any other pharmacist. You will learn about these during your training and you can revise your knowledge of the details in “Medicines, ethics and practice”. Specific tasks and services required of you will vary from pharmacy to pharmacy. In addition to dispensary duties, staff supervision and giving advice to patients,

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you may be asked to provide services under the new pharmacy contractual framework.

The new NHS community pharmacy contract represents a major challenge and opportunity for pharmacist locums, particularly in the following areas:

Standard operating procedures (SOPs)

As a locum you need to quickly get to grips with the procedures that have been adopted in a particular pharmacy. SOPs are generally increasing the quality of operation in community pharmacies, and it seems unlikely that you would have a problem with the standards set in an individual pharmacy.

Dispensary assistants and technicians

Both groups must be appropriately trained and qualified. Increasingly you are likely to work with accredited checking technicians. Who will take responsibility for any errors made in the dispensing process?

New services Will you be prepared to offer services (eg, repeat dispensing, medicines use review, supervised administration of methadone, home care support, out of hours services, smoking cessation, screening of at-risk people, anticoagulant monitoring, patient group directions, supplementary prescribing) under the new contract? Providing these services requires training, and in most cases, accreditation. The more services

you can offer, the more marketable you will be. It will also increase your job satisfaction.

Continuing professional development (CPD)

CPD is obligatory for all practising pharmacists. This places particular demands on locums who will generally not have access to training offered by employers. You therefore need to be proactive about CPD and keep yourself up to date with new developments and new skills.

Registration with and transfer of accreditation for pharmaceutical services between primary care trusts (PCTs)

The suggestion is that from 2006, locums in England will have to enrol on the supplementary list of the PCT in which they are registered. Whether accreditation for services will be transferable is as yet unclear. In Wales, however, a central list is held of pharmacists accredited to provide medication use reviews and locums will be able to provide such services across as many local health boards as they wish.

Professional indemnity insurance

Consider obtaining your own indemnity insurance. Although the pharmacy's professional indemnity should cover you, always check this before accepting a booking. Pharmacies who are members of the National Pharmacy Association (NPA) will have indemnity insurance that covers locums. In the event of a professional dispute between the pharmacy and you, the NPA will provide both parties with representation. However, if a contractual issue arises, your legal expenses will not be covered if you choose to raise a case against the member.

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Several insurance companies provide professional indemnity insurance. Pharmacy specific ones include the Pharmacists' Defence Association (www.the-pda.org) and Pharmacists' Professional Indemnity (www.pharmacistindemnity.co.uk).

Income tax matters

As soon as you start work, you should inform your local inspector of taxes. Visit the Inland Revenue website at www.hmrc.gov.uk/home.htm and study the self-employment and self-assessment sections. If you work full time as a locum, you should consider having an accountant — good ones can usually save you their fees and more in reducing your tax bill.

Keep records of all your income and expenditure on a regular basis. A software package will make this job quick and easy, calculating your net income on an ongoing basis over the year. Examples include Mind Your Own Business (www.myob.co.uk), Quicken (www.quicken.co.uk) and Sage (www.sage.co.uk).

It is also a good idea to estimate in advance how much tax and national insurance you will have to pay and consider putting away the equivalent amount each month in a separate bank or building society account so you will not be caught out by unexpected bills. If you expect your locum earnings to be around £30,000 a year, for example, your total tax and national insurance will be around £6,500 (unless your tax affairs are complex). Personally, I try to put away a quarter of my untaxed income each month.

Tips for locums

Ensure you know exactly when (dates and times) and where (check the full name, address and telephone number of the pharmacy) you have arranged to work. Be organised — with a diary or a personal digital assistant.

Estimate how long it will take you to get to work. For a map of where you are going, click on to www.streetmap.co.uk or www.mapquest.co.uk. The latter site will also advise you of the best route to drive to your destination from home and the length of time it is expected to take. Take into account bad weather and rush-hour traffic.

Ask about support staff — numbers, responsibilities and expertise.

Ask about pharmacy services and whether you will be expected to provide them. Do not work in a pharmacy where you are not accredited or do not have the expertise to provide a service.

Negotiate fees and expenses (unless you work for an agency when this will be done for you) and find out how you will be paid — cheque, cash or bank transfer.

Always try to arrive at the pharmacy in good time and take your registration certificate with you. Portable versions are available from the Royal Pharmaceutical Society.

Report all significant events that happen in the pharmacy, including dispensing errors. Leave your contact details. There is usually a communication book in the dispensary to allow you to do this.

Maintain your marketability. Be pro-active with your CPD. Keep up to date with new developments and be prepared to learn new skills.

For further information:

Mason P. Locum Pharmacy. 2nd ed. London:

Pharmaceutical Press, 2004. ISBN

0853695695.