

GET ON THE PRODUCTION LINE

If the community and hospital sectors don't get you buzzing, maybe a career in the pharmaceutical industry will. Brian Dougherty, founder of a multi-million pound specials company, describes how he got to where he is today and what you can expect from a career industry

Brian Dougherty is chairman and founder of The Specials Laboratory

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They say there is no substitute for experience and that rarely rings more true than at The Specials Laboratory. In just eight years, we have transformed a quiet corner of Northumberland into a centre of excellence for the development and preparation of unlicensed medicines as well as for the manufacture of specialist dosage products. This year our turnover exceeded £10m for the first time and this has been made possible by the amazing pool of talent that exists in the region and around the UK offering the specialist skills, knowledge and experience that are so vital in the pharmaceutical industry. This is an essential resource not only to our industry, but also to the health of the entire population, and it is one that my colleagues and I are keen to maintain and to develop.

It seems that barely a week goes by now without some university closing its science department or a sixth form ceasing to offer chemistry at A-Level. These are small issues in themselves, but taken together they represent a tangible threat to the future growth and prosperity of the pharmaceutical industry in Britain. Thinking about why young people choose to enter the industry, or not, caused me to reflect on my own career path.

How I got started

My first thoughts of a pharmaceutical vocation came when my father forced me to spend a whole day greasing car engines before explaining to me that I would need to work hard at school if I did not want to do that for the rest of my

life. There is, of course, no shame in greasing car engines, but the old man succeeded in focusing my mind on a future career path.

Science was the avenue I chose and, to a 16-year-old from Gateshead it was a field of unlimited opportunities. I worked hard like my dad had said and started a pharmacy degree at Leicester Polytechnic, but the student life seemed destined not to suit me and they booted me out after the first year. I returned home, started a traineeship with Sterling Winthrop and discovered the joys of a pay packet and a social life while studying for a higher national diploma part time. They then offered me the opportunity to complete a degree part time and the thought of spending my evenings studying for the next four years sent me scurrying back to Leicester to return to my old course. What my brief period in the real world had taught me, however, was the need to apply myself.

After graduating with a 2:1 — if anyone tells you that a first class degree is a prerequisite for success in the pharmaceutical industry, please ignore them — I completed six months of my preregistration training at Whitechapel Hospital in London, before joining the Wellcome Foundation in Dartford, Kent. In those days, this was one of the most respected and popular ways into the industry and the foundation provided my route to full qualification and into the company that was to be my employer for the next 10 years.

In a decade with Wellcome, I worked in management, production, personnel

and product transfer, providing me with the experience and knowledge that later gave me the confidence to strike out on my own. During this time, I became the first pharmacist in the UK to achieve the new QP quality control qualification, which is now the standard for all industry professionals. I also managed one of the largest aseptic filling units in Europe.

The variability in my role was what pleased me the most. While fellow graduates were stuck in chemist shops doling out prescriptions, I was able to travel to America on product-transfer projects and spend a few months with an affiliated manufacturer in South Africa. My time at Wellcome taught me the importance of variety and also why it is vital to offer your employees all the support, training and responsibility they deserve. In the end, it is about mutual trust between the employer, the employee and the client.

After this, I took my only sabbatical from the pharmaceutical industry, going to work with a manufacturer of cloth products, such as baby wipes. This served only to confirm that my heart lay in the world of medicines, so I left and became a locum for community pharmacists. After one year, I had made the decision that this job was also not for me and I returned to manufacturing, where I have remained ever since. A management role followed with Fisons, where I oversaw the rationalisation of a large manufacturing site in Holmes Chapel, Cheshire. This taught me even more about why people are so important to the success of any business. I then worked for Scotia Pharmaceuticals in



Scotland, before deciding to make the move back to the north east of England and the scary, but enticing, prospect of controlling my own destiny. I first worked with Fiona Cruickshank, my partner at The Specials Laboratory, when I was a night-shift supervisor at Wellcome. More than any other role I have worked in, this was one where people and personalities really mattered as I seemed to spend most of my time dealing with issues for those who really should have been working nine till five. In contrast, Fiona and I worked well together and we were in the right place at the right time when the opportunity came along to start up The Specials Laboratory.

The Specials Laboratory

We started off with one employee in converted doctor's accommodation at the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle, fulfilling a role that had traditionally been that of a community chemist. The era of pharmacists mixing unlicensed medicines in the back of their shops is long gone and we spotted a gap in the market for high quality products, created in a carefully controlled environment to the specifications of doctors.

From the beginning, we always had a long-term ambition to expand into clinical manufacturing, and we made this move in 2004 with the launch of Specials Clinical Manufacturing. Together, the two firms now employ

more than 150 people in facilities created with over £10m capital investment, offering products that set the standard of the industry and with a reputation that is spreading throughout the UK. Success is never something that we have taken for granted, however, and if anything it has made me more aware than ever of the challenges that face our industry. We are also aware that our people are a key factor in our success.

The first and most important factor when we are adding to the Specials team is personality. We are hugely committed professionals, working under highly controlled conditions, so it is vital that everyone gets along and functions as a team. Across the entire company and right through the facility, we expect everyone to have a smile on their face and adopt a can-do attitude. We do our bit by making our sites as bright and welcoming as possible, consulting with employees and making sure we listen.

Recruitment methods are diverse according to the qualifications and experience demanded by each individual role. Many posts can be filled locally, while we will look further afield for more senior scientific roles, advertising in the relevant trade publications. One benefit of our growing size and reputation has also been an increase in the number of speculative CVs landing on my desk.

In addition to my own membership of the Association of Specials Manufacturers and our sponsorship of

the British Pharmaceutical Students Association, as well as Fiona's guest lecturing role at Newcastle Business School, we work to support relevant courses at local colleges by enrolling our own staff. For example, four team members are currently completing the BTEC in pharmacy services at Tyne Metropolitan College, a course for which we also provided visiting lecturers and lab resources.

Your career

I am here to tell you that there are plenty of opportunities, money to be made and experiences to be had in the field of pharmaceutical manufacturing. Although your starting wage will not be as high as that of community pharmacists, this will even out over time and you will find there is greater scope for advancement. You will be offered a varied and exciting opportunity to shape your career in the way you want it to go, with none of the limitations that you will find in community pharmacy. If you have an entrepreneurial spirit, you will find opportunities to develop your management and leadership skills. Alternatively, you may want to develop specialist skills in a dedicated area of the profession. Firms like ours will reward your hard work and dedication with a total commitment to you and your future career. ■