

How to recruit specialist pharmacists

Recruiting pharmacists into specialist services can be difficult. **Tom Moberly** visited Peter Pratt, chief pharmacist at Doncaster and South Humber Healthcare NHS Trust, to learn about a programme he is running which may provide a novel solution to the problem

Overall there is a national shortage of pharmacists who choose to work in psychiatry or mental health, says Peter Pratt, Chief Pharmacist at Doncaster and South Humber Healthcare NHS Trust.

Mr Pratt's novel solution to this problem is to offer a programme of one-day taster placements to pharmacists who are interested in a change of direction and want to find out more about working in mental health pharmacy.

"A lot of pharmacists or pharmacy students have never had the chance to experience working in the fascinating field of mental health," Mr Pratt explains. "This project gives us the opportunity to show pharmacists and pharmacy students how interesting and rewarding it can be to work in psychiatric practice."

Mr Pratt believes that simply giving pharmacists the chance to see what mental health pharmacy involves should help persuade them to apply for positions in the area. The lack of enthusiasm is, to some degree, Mr Pratt argues, a result of inadequacies in undergraduate psychiatric training.

"I can distinctly remember the total lack of any contact with patients in my training," he says, arguing that this lack of contact leads to the notion that mental health is all about biochemistry and neurones and a failure to appreciate the "people side" of mental illness.

By giving pharmacists the opportunity to see the difference they can make to the lives of psychiatric patients, Mr Pratt hopes to be able to help generate the enthusiasm necessary to make pharmacists apply for positions in mental health pharmacy.

"The idea is to sow the seed of enthusiasm, so that people aren't scared of mental illness and can see whether their skills and experience can be applied," Mr Pratt explains.

Funding

The National Institute for Mental Health in England is providing the funding for the project, as part of the Mental Health Care Group Workforce team looking at modern roles and ways of working in mental health. The team includes Barry Foley, mental health lead at NIHME and Roslyn Hope, director of the National Workforce Programme. One of the keys aims of the workforce strategy is "to identify and use creative means to recruit and retain people in the workforce in order to increase the overall numbers in successive years".

The concept of taster placements provides an innovative solution to recruitment problems and, since money was specifically ring-fenced for mental health pharmacy, Mr Pratt



Peter Pratt: the psychiatric pharmacy placement programme aims "to sow the seed of enthusiasm"

was able to put in a bid for £9,000 to fund the project, allowing reasonable travel and accommodation costs to be refunded to successful candidates. Importantly, the funds will also be able to cover locum fees, so that potential applicants need not worry that they will have to pay out of their own pockets to cover absences.

Individual tailoring

At the initial interview, each applicant is asked in which areas of psychiatric pharmacy they are particularly interested and each taster day is then designed around the applicant's preferences. These can include acute inpatient care, outreach and early intervention, substance misuse, old-age psychiatry, rehabilitation psychiatry or any other area. Applicants are also asked why they want to come for a taster and what their career aspirations are.

Since the taster days are individually tailored, options can be discussed which are not directly covered in the Doncaster and South Humber Healthcare NHS Trust area.

The programme will run for a year and over that time, Mr Pratt aims to give placements to 40 pharmacists. If the programme fails to recruit enough pharmacists, a stand at a major pharmacy conference will be organised to promote the scheme to potential applicants. The stand could also be used to explain the programme to other specialist pharmacists who may be interested in starting a similar scheme to help recruitment in their specialty, Mr Pratt suggests.

Mr Pratt is determined that the project should take off and achieve its aims. "We need to make sure this isn't just another bright idea. We need to learn from it — learn what works well and what the problems are," adds Mr Pratt, pointing out that good ideas often founder in the detail of their implementation.

He decided, therefore, that, for the taster programme to be successful, the administrative details have to be right. A secretary has therefore been given the specific job of organising the administration of the project.

Evaluation of the project will begin before pharmacists come for their placements. There will also be post-project assessment, Mr Pratt says: "They will be followed up two to three months later to see whether anyone has bitten the bullet and made the move to psychiatric pharmacy."

The results of this evaluation will be crucial when applying for further funds. If the project is successful, it will mean the idea can be presented to other primary care trusts, with the simple message: "This is something you should be doing as part of your own recruitment and retention campaign."

Generic applicability

Although the programme is primarily aimed at pharmacists, it should certainly be possible, Mr Pratt points out, to arrange something beyond the programme, so that pharmacy students or preregistration trainees thinking of going into psychiatric pharmacy can see what specialist psychiatric pharmacists do and the difference that pharmacists can make to patient care.

There is also no reason, Mr Pratt argues, why the idea should not be extended to any other specialist pharmacy areas facing recruitment difficulties: "Maybe all difficult-to-recruit-to specialties will think about this."

Putting money aside for such placements would also make financial sense given the costs incurred when recruitment fails, Mr Pratt argues. "Why has nobody thought 'We'll put £10,000 aside [for recruitment]'? Because not being able to recruit anyone for three or four months will cost that. Three or four adverts will cost that."

It may be, then, that the profession will see similar placements in other specialties in the future, giving pharmacists who are looking to change careers a real understanding of what specialist pharmacy can offer. Anyone who would like to apply for one of the taster placements should contact Doncaster and South Humber Healthcare NHS Trust on 01302 796226.