BEING A COMMUNITY LOCUM PHARMACIST

If you like flexibility in your working hours and enjoy working in different pharmacies or even different cities, you may want to consider becoming a community locum pharmacist. Heena Bhakta provides some tips to ensure your locum experience is enjoyable and fun.

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Many of you who have worked in community pharmacy may have worked with a locum pharmacist. Working as a locum can be a daunting task but a rewarding one too. If you are thinking of locuming, then consider the following points as you make a decision.

**Advantages**

As a locum, you can choose when you want to work. Working patterns can range from working four days intensely, then having three days off, to working three weeks and having every fourth week off. You also have the choice of working where you want to work, for example, in a multiple, independent or supermarket. And this can also be in the place of your choice, enabling you to see new towns and cities.

The pay as a locum is good. However, make sure you agree on a rate before you agree to work in a pharmacy. Also, remember that, at the end of the financial year, you will have to write a big fat cheque to the taxman, so do not spend it all at once.

Locuming, without a doubt, provides variation. Locums will see lots of different prescribing habits and lots of different drugs and doses being used — every day is different. There are different ways of working (some good, some bad) and “best practice” can be transferred from pharmacy to pharmacy. Often, locums will also pick up on patients going from pharmacy to pharmacy to purchase misusable over-the-counter medicines.

**Disadvantages**

Locuming can be lonely because you are not part of an established team and cannot build a rapport with the staff you work with and the patients you see. Also, there is no support structure so you do not have a contact person whom you can contact for help. There is no regularity with work and some weeks can be busy, whereas others are quiet. Working in an unfamiliar place can also lead to taking a longer time to get the job done and different standard operating procedures can apply in different places. Often, there is no continuity in your work, so it is difficult to chase up any queries you may have initially dealt with.

As a locum, you are classed as self-employed. This means you have to pay your own taxes and do your own accounts. Make sure you keep up to date with your payments and also keep a record of money that you spend. The Inland Revenue provides workshops on how to do your own accounts or you could pay for an accountant to do them for you.

**Starting off**

Choose a couple of locum agencies and then pick one that you like. Locum agencies can provide work that is nationwide or in your specific area. There are many advertisements for locum agencies in *The Pharmaceutical Journal* and other pharmacy magazines. Ideally, choose an agency that has been recommended to you. Locum agencies will find work for you when and where you require. Write to pharmacies in your area, telling them you are available for work. In your letter, mention what hours you are able to work and any extra qualifications you may have (eg, accredited to conduct medicines use reviews). Find addresses from the NHS website or the local telephone book.

Buy some inexpensive but professional-looking business cards and give them out. Go into pharmacies you want to work in and hand them your card. Make sure you dress smartly because appearances do count, even when you are not officially at work.

Go to local branch meetings and network with other pharmacists. You will probably meet some community pharmacists who need a locum. Again, hand out your business cards.

**Hints and tips**

Here are a few hints and tips that may help you to ensure your locuming is stress free:

• Telephone the pharmacy you are going to work at before hand to gather information, such as opening times, whether the pharmacy closes for lunch, where can you park your car, how many staff you will be working with, how you will get paid.
• Take your certificate with you and make sure you display it.
• At the end of the day, make sure you leave the dispensary tidy. Leave a note for the pharmacist for the following day, mentioning any queries or jobs to do.
What to keep in your locum bag

This is the essential guide on what to keep in your locum bag. Make sure the bag itself is durable and water proof, with lots of pockets. Items should include:

- Stockley’s Drug Interactions (pocket companion)
- British National Formulary (some pharmacies hide them!)
- Medicines, Ethics and Practice
- High energy lunch with a bottle of water
- Satellite navigation system
- Registration certificate
- Diary (perhaps you can book more dates at the pharmacy you are working in)
- Friends who are pharmacists (for advice)
- Insurance provider

Do not forget to leave your business card

Do not be a lazy locum

Locums can have a bad reputation and are sometimes seen as being stubborn and lazy (eg, reading newspapers and not doing any work). Even if you are only working in a pharmacy for a day, you are still part of the pharmacy team, so teamwork is essential. If you have a good reputation then you are likely to get more work.

Be proactive and friendly when working in a new pharmacy. Different companies have different computer systems. So spend an afternoon in a pharmacy to get to know the computer system. A few freebie afternoons are likely to get you more paid work in the future.

Register with the local primary care trust and become accredited to do local patient group directions and other services. Often, locums get left out because they are not attached to a certain premises. So get in contact with the PCT and see what services you can provide to patients in your area. Let pharmacies know if you are MUR accredited because this may increase your chances of getting work. Also, do not forget to register for your smartcard with the PCT.

Find out the level of knowledge of the staff that you are working with. Are they trained dispensers or work experience students? Listen to counter assistants when they are selling OTC medicines. If you want to give the patient additional advice then do so.

Are you working with accredited checking technicians? If so, do you mind them checking prescriptions? Legally, you have full responsibility and it is your certificate on the wall. If you do not know the level of competence of the staff then you have the right to ask ACTs not to check when you are there.

Working as a locum pharmacist is a challenging role in pharmacy but one that offers many benefits. It is a great way to see different areas of community pharmacy as well as building self confidence. Having done the job for the past year, I would definitely recommend it for you to try.

- Royal Pharmaceutical Society medicines information (020 7572 2302)
- Pharmacy where you are working (in case you are going to be late, etc)
- Friends who are pharmacists (for advice)
- Insurance provider