EXPERIENCING COMMUNITY PHARMACY IN GERMANY

The student exchange programme, offered by the British Pharmaceutical Students' Association, gives pharmacy students an opportunity to experience the practice of pharmacy in a foreign country. David Lumsden writes about his experience of working in a community pharmacy in Osnabrück, Germany.

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Through the British Pharmaceutical Students’ Association, pharmacy students can apply to go almost anywhere in the world, working in community, hospital, industrial or academic pharmacy. Hopefully, after submitting your application, a pharmacist will invite you to his or her pharmacy.

In February 2008, I applied for a summer placement in Germany for a maximum of five weeks. In April, I received a phone call from German pharmacist Eberhard Groeger, who has hosted students for the past 15 years, inviting me to work in his pharmacy during August and September. After a few e-mail exchanges, it was official and in August I arrived to meet the Groeger family in Osnabrück. We made our way to the small town of Spenge where I would be working and living.

The Hirsch Apotheke (Stag Pharmacy) has been running for over 150 years. Donning my new white lab coat on the first day at work, I began to learn the computer system and shelf layouts. It is a spacious pharmacy. The front shop is stocked with cosmetic products, healthy fruit juices, herbal teas, pharmacy customer magazines and popular drugs, such as aspirin and diclofenac gels, behind the counter. Behind the front shop is a large room with sliding shelves, stocked with many drugs. There is a separate office for the pharmacist to do paperwork and a laboratory that is used for compounding prescription creams and gels. There is also a room for storing chemicals and other items are stored.

After a few days, I was putting away deliveries, and the cellar where and counselling is required. To add to the confusion, contracts are changing because they are not receiving exactly the pharmacy. It is the patient’s responsibility to remember the dosage and directions or write them down before leaving the pharmacy.

Sometimes, customers come to buy herbal teas. A doctor writes a recipe/prescription for a specific herbal tea and then a member of staff follows the recipe and makes it. It is a popular and common practice in Germany because many plants are known for their medicinal qualities. An example is senna leaves in a tea acting as a laxative.

Customers are often asked to come back at a later time or day, thereby allowing staff time to find, make or order the ingredients. The ingredients are weighed, grounded with a mortar and pestle if required, mixed, bagged, labelled and priced for collection. It is interesting that herbal teas and medicines go hand-in-hand in German pharmacies, whereas, in the UK, teas are not a popular remedy in pharmacies.

One day in the pharmacy, I was shocked to learn a customer bought opium over-the-counter. On asking the pharmacist about this, I was told it was...
a homoeopathic remedy. The philosophy of homoeopathy is that a sick person can be treated using a substance that, in a healthy person, causes symptoms similar to the sick person's illness. This idea was first developed in the 18th century by Dr Samuel Hahnemann. To take the example above, a mass of opium in solution is diluted to 100ml, 10ml is extracted and then diluted to 100ml and this is repeated 12 times, shaking the solution at each stage to diffuse the particles through the solution. This example would be called opium D12, the "D" standing for the latin decimus — a tenth, and 12 being the amount of times it is diluted.

So why is homoeopathy so popular in Germany? It is because people have embraced the idea that natural products are better for you and doctors are happy to prescribe homoeopathic remedies to their patients. The best explanation from the pharmacist was if the people believe in it, they should be able to buy it.

A few other items customers like to buy from the pharmacy were pharmacy-made stomach ointment, Swedish bitters and homemade liqueur. The liqueur aids digestion and a sore stomach. The pharmacy used to compound and sell many medicines to customers and other pharmacies in the area. Now, only a few herbal items can be made and sold in the pharmacy because it is difficult for the pharmacy to provide clinical test data set out by the EU. The pharmacy liqueur is a popular Christmas present for drinking before and after a big meal.

Apart from increasing my pharmacy experience, I had opportunities outside working hours to enjoy the culture. I went out to the beer gardens with the pharmacist's sons, go-karting, and eating German food, such as schnitzel and bratwurst. I also went sailing with the pharmacist, his wife and daughter on my first weekend.

My experience of working in Germany has left a lasting mark on me and I believe it will influence my practice in years to come. It was good fun and I would recommend that other students take part in this programme to improve their knowledge, learn how pharmacy operates in another country and enjoy a good cultural experience.