Pharmacists in Schools: promoting pharmacy to future generations

Ryan F. Donnelly describes a new scheme designed to help children understand the varied roles pharmacists can play.

Pharmacists in Schools is a programme developed by the School of Pharmacy at Queen’s University Belfast in partnership with local schools. Under the scheme, which is set to reach over 400 pupils in 20 local schools, children are given the opportunity to be “pharmacists for the day”.

The initiative, launched in December 2009, is being supported by the Northern Pharmacies Trust. It aims to increase awareness of the varied roles undertaken by pharmacists in the community. It also promotes the idea of the pharmacist as the scientist on the high street and the expert on medicines.

Staff and undergraduate students from the school of pharmacy visit schools to give children the opportunity to dispense three “medicines” in response to prescriptions for fictional patients. Importantly, the medicines act as a focus to stimulate discussion and schoolchildren learn about the importance of the practical application of science to their daily lives in an enjoyable and informal environment. The children learn how pharmacists use their medical and scientific knowledge to make medicines for patients and advise them on their safe and effective use.

The programme is designed primarily for children aged 11 to 13 years in secondary or grammar schools, but can be readily adapted to suit older children, as well as those in primary education. It is hoped that the scheme will encourage them to consider science-based career options, particularly pharmacy.

“One study highlighted how a third of students studying science and engineering at one university had made their choice by the age of 12,” said David Woolfson, head of the school of pharmacy at Queen’s. “I have no doubt that Pharmacists in Schools will create that sense of wonder and enthusiasm in those pupils who participate in it. And even if they do not go on to study pharmacy, they will have a real understanding of what pharmacists do,” he added.

Pharmacists in Schools provides a valuable outreach opportunity for the School of Pharmacy at Queen’s. In addition, school of pharmacy staff are accompanied on their visits to schools by level 4 pharmacy students and this provides an important teaching opportunity for the students, enabling them to hone the organisational and communication skills learned during the MPharm degree programme.

The scheme has been piloted in 10 schools to date and a positive response has been obtained from both teachers and pupils in each of these schools. Mary Keating, principal of St Brigid’s Primary School, County Armagh, said: “The Pharmacists in Schools programme has featured in the local press and school newsletters to parents. It is hoped to widen access to the initiative further in 2010.

Children making an oral suspension from solid dosage forms, supervised by technician Helen McPhillips

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