How you can avoid the community pharmacy locum position from hell

Hospital pharmacists sometimes like to try their hand as locum pharmacists in community practice. What are the pitfalls to look out for? How can they ensure they are prepared? Leila Taheri talked to a few to find out

Leila Taheri

Left alone with two shop assistants unfamiliar with dispensing and labelling, a computer system she could not operate and almost no guidance from the regular pharmacist, a hospital pharmacist from north-west England found herself in uncharted waters when she acted as a locum pharmacist in the community. “I couldn’t use the computer so patients were waiting for hours as I made hand adjustments to the labels,” she recalled.

The pharmacist, who preferred not to be named, told The Journal: “My advice to any inexperienced pharmacist who wants to give community a go is get the facts [about the pharmacy you will work in]. . . . In an ideal world all patient medication record systems would be the same. But it’s impossible to know them all so, if you don’t know the system, I would advise don’t do the locum — unless you are working with a qualified member of staff.”

The hospital pharmacist had previously worked for a different multiple where a dispenser had been present so her experience earlier this summer was one she had not anticipated. Neither is it one that is untypical, according to Lindsey Gilpin, founder of the internet forum LocumVoice and a community pharmacy locum with 38 years’ experience.

She said: “I think she was unlucky because most managers or owners have more sense than to leave an inexperienced locum on their own but this is not unique. It comes down to communication. There is nothing wrong with explaining that you would prefer to work with a dispenser at least for the first time of being in that pharmacy. If the owner is not prepared to put that in place, then don’t work for them.”

Mrs Gilpin, who is also chairman of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society’s English Pharmacy Board, stressed the importance of knowing the pharmacy’s computer system and simply understanding one’s limitations. “You could ask for a bit of training with the PMR system before the locum [job],” she suggested. Mrs Gilpin recognised that going into a pharmacy before a placement is not always feasible but finding out what to expect is of paramount importance to avoid a stressful shift resulting.

A union’s perspective

In the Pharmacists’ Defence Association’s locum booklet “Rights and responsibilities”, the union recommends pharmacists take time to familiarise themselves with the company’s standard operating procedures — this should not necessarily be considered unpaid work to be completed in pharmacists’ own time.

It also points out that it is the responsibility of the locum to ensure that their workload and working conditions do not compromise patient care or public safety. “It is for this reason that you need to ensure that you are comfortable with the quantity and quality of staff you are working with, the workload you have undertaken and any other factors which influence your ability to perform your job.”

If pharmacy staff are constantly taken from the pharmacy to work on supermarket check outs or staffing levels are inadequate, the locum should give serious consideration to closing the pharmacy if patient safety is compromised, informing the superintendent’s office and the primary care organisation, the booklet advises.

Advice from an experienced locum

Nevertheless, working as a locum can be rewarding financially and in broadening one’s pharmaceutical experience, according to John Packham, a retired pharmacist with 50 years’ locum experience. He believes that the first locum jobs are important in giving confidence to meet challenges and there are many ways to ensure that the first position runs smoothly.

He said: “If you are near to a large town, then the largest pharmacy may well have a staff of two or more pharmacists plus several technicians. Such a pharmacy would be ideal in giving you an introduction. Make sure that they are aware of your lack of community experience and tell them of any relevant experience that you think you have gained in industry or hospital.” He also advises first working in a quiet pharmacy: “Smaller pharmacies, for example, often close on Saturday afternoons and it is difficult for them to obtain locum cover just for the morning.”

WHAT THE MULTIPLES SAY ABOUT HOW TO PREPARE

Asda
Superintendent pharmacist for Asda John Evans told The Journal that the company selects locums from its database (which pharmacists can register with). Mr Evans said pharmacists should ensure they are familiar with the computer system the company uses — Cegedim’s Nexphase. He also said that it is rare for a locum to be expected to work without support staff in the pharmacy.

Boots
A spokeswoman said: “When working as a self-employed locum, pharmacists are contracting to provide a full pharmaceutical service and as such should ensure they’re fully competent in the services that they are offering prior to taking on a paid assignment in a different sector.”

Day Lewis
Recruitment officer Katriona Guerin advised that those who only want to work the occasional locum should work a number of days unpaid shadowing a pharmacist to ensure they are competent before taking on any locum bookings. She said that every Day Lewis branch has a technician or dispenser present. The company does not employ locums who have no previous community experience.

The Co-operative Pharmacy
Scheduling manager Ifti Khan said the company gives the option to work, where possible, with an experienced pharmacist as a second pharmacist before working alone. He also said: “Obtain clarification [from the duty pharmacist] on the services you will be expected to deliver and try to get a feel for the intensity of the business and details on dispensary support available.” Pharmacists should also ask about rest breaks, he said.

Superdrug
A spokeswoman said: “We encourage all new locums to contact the store beforehand. If requested, we are also happy to allow a new locum to work-shadow one of our pharmacy managers. In every store, there is an up to date locum information file which provides all the questions a new locum might have.”

Lloydspharmacy
A spokeswoman said it is advisable to gain some experience in community pharmacy alongside an experienced pharmacist before taking on a locuming role.

Tesco
Tesco was not prepared to comment.

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