So you want to be a Pharmaceutical Physician?

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You want to what? How are you going to tell your boss that you are leaving Health Service to join the dark side? Your mother will worry that she might not be able to continue telling her friends that you are a doctor.

You can tell them confidently that you are looking forward to a varied and stimulating career that could ultimately benefit more patients than you could ever treat in your own practice.

SO WHAT IS PHARMACEUTICAL MEDICINE?

Pharmaceutical medicine is one of the best kept secrets of the medical world. It is the specialty concerned with the development, evaluation, licensing and monitoring of medicines as well as the medical aspects of their marketing.

Pharmaceutical physicians work in different environments including regulatory agencies, drug companies and research organisations.

IS PHARMACEUTICAL MEDICINE REALLY A MEDICAL SPECIALTY?

Yes.

The need for involvement of medics in the development of medicines became increasingly recognised during the 1960s. The role of the specialist evolved rapidly to provide an interface between pharmaceutical medicine and other medical disciplines. Creation of The Faculty of Pharmaceutical Medicine (FPM) within the Royal College of Physicians addressed demands for medicines to be developed and monitored to the highest scientific and ethical standards. The FPM was formally established in 1989 and in 2002, Pharmaceutical Medicine was officially recognised as a specialty in the UK. The FPM continues to set and maintain the highest standards of pharmaceutical practice.

WHERE IS PHARMACEUTICAL MEDICINE GOING AS A SPECIALTY?

Pharmaceutical medicine continues to grow. It is the 12th largest specialty based on the number of trainees, more than, for example, medical oncology. It is a dynamic specialty reflecting the need for an international collaboration between science and business. Half of FPM members are non-UK based, reflecting the global nature of Pharmaceutical Medicine.

The Faculty recognises qualifications from Belgium and Switzerland and in 2011 the Diploma in Pharmaceutical Medicine examination will be held in the UK and overseas, in South Africa, simultaneously.

HOW ARE PHARMACEUTICAL PHYSICIANS TRAINED?

As with most specialties, the majority of training takes place on the job. Training takes 4 years and requires completion of the Diploma examination. In addition, you must provide evidence that you have reached the required standards in the following areas: regulation, pharmacology,

- statistics, development,
- healthcare marketplace, drug safety, role of the medical department, discovery of new medicines, therapeutics.

CAN I CARRY ON DOING SOME CLINICAL WORK WHilst WORKING IN PHARMA?

You could, and roles that require a more in-depth disease knowledge might even encourage this. My perspective is that you will be busy enough focusing on the one job.

NO ON-CALL SOUNDS GREAT – WHEN DO I START?

Hang-on a minute. Business is about ensuring a good return on investment.

Companies invest in you and will expect you to work in return. The pressures of life in industry are different from the clinic but there are pressures. To quote Dr Appleton (Appleton AL. Long hours not unique. BMA News May 14 2011: www.bma.org.uk/bmanews) “excessive hours are not the preserve of junior doctors”. New entrants expecting an easy ride should probably look elsewhere.

HOW DO I JOIN INDUSTRY?

The simple answer is you apply for a job, are interviewed rigorously and are judged on your merits.

Although I went into my first role somewhat naively, it provided a good starting point for a career as a Pharmaceutical Physician and I was able to work with some talented people in an innovative company. There are many roles for medics.

I recommend talking to physicians in industry to understand the options available and what might suit you best. Traditional starting roles include working in a contract research organisation reviewing the safety data from patients in trials; junior drug safety roles reviewing adverse events from your company’s drugs; medical manager (advisor) where you are the lead scientist working with the commercial team.

To enter specialist training in pharmaceutical medicine you need to have completed at least two years’ post foundation clinical training. While completing specialist training is not yet essential for being a Pharmaceutical Physician, it is desirable, particularly for senior UK roles.

Your specialty pre-industry may help you get roles that require expert knowledge, but as a medic, you already have the ability to pick up scientific concepts pretty quickly. Personal skills are also highly valued and in my opinion more important; requirements vary depending on whether your role requires a gregarious strategic thinker or a logical, critical data reviewer.

FINDING OUT MORE

Find out more by contacting the Faculty (www.fpm.org.uk) or BRAPP (www.brapp.org).

Who knows we may soon meet at a congress; as I have, you can have the opportunity to live around the world, work with talented people from different cultures and change disease paradigms. Not bad for a week’s work.