

# A Tale of Two Worlds?



*In this article, Sarah Kelly, Hospital Pharmacist with St Vincent's University Hospital lifts the veil on working life as a Pharmacist within the hospital setting in Ireland.*

A hospital pharmacist's job has always been something of an enigma to those in my life outside of my colleagues, classmates and parents (the latter, through listening to me during years of study, probably couldn't forget if they tried).

Yet since qualifying, I've lost count of the times those family and friends that are a bit more distant from the relatively small world of pharmacy have asked; "So what exactly is it that you do in work every day?" Considering my own interest in hospital pharmacy was sparked during my first week as a pharmacy student, incidentally the first time I had ever heard of the career in the hospital setting, their

questions are reasonable. With this article, I thought maybe here's a chance to lift that veil a little; through my own experience as a recently qualified member of the profession.

Being trained from student to working professional within an Irish teaching hospital's pharmacy department, I have been lucky enough to have worked across different areas unique to the profession. These each differ from the classical view most Irish people have of pharmacy.

#### Clinical Pharmacy

Clinical pharmacists work directly with patients and members of the multidisciplinary team on the ward. We confirm that any

medicines prescribed to a patient are clinically appropriate ensuring their drug therapy is both safe and effective during their stay.

#### Minimising Risk and Errors

Working alongside the multidisciplinary team, we ensure the correct guidance and drug treatment pathways for a patient's clinical condition are used and applied correctly; from the treatment of a blood clot to life-threatening sepsis. We also advise on the management of their pre-admission medications around their new, acutely unwell situation; such as the complex drug management of conditions like diabetes in someone undergoing major surgery.

Further drug management issues can arise when patients become sicker or increasingly unstable during their admission – such as a decline in renal function requiring dosage changes and we monitor our patients on a regular basis to check for these. Where appropriate, we will also educate patients on discharge about any medicines newly started whilst in hospital, in order to help their understanding upon heading home.

#### Medicines Information

Any recommendations made regarding a patient's drug treatment are always rooted in a sound evidence-base; and so here medicines information pharmacists make their appearance. We gather answers to specific questions on medication usage by accessing reliable and up-to-date sources of information. Questions can involve anything to do with a medicine, from the weird and wonderful (advising on suitable alternatives to an unavailable, foreign medicine) to the routine (which of a list of medicines are appropriate to take in the first trimester of pregnancy).

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We enable enquirers to make informed decisions on the use of medicines in their patient; thoroughly assessing evidence on their behalf and summarising it in a clear and practical manner. This is where I started working as a qualified pharmacist, it gives a great background once working as a ward-based clinical pharmacist to know the right places to look for your information.

#### Aseptic compounding

Aseptic pharmacists are a rare sight within most hospitals – dressed apart from the pharmacist norm in scrubs and usually found inside their clean compounding unit. This role is very fulfilling; involving the safe and effective supply of chemotherapy products to patients. Working as a team within the unit alongside pharmaceutical technicians, the process we work through forms a protective layer between the patient and their chemotherapy.

It is cyclical work, with each stage being checked and overseen by multiple members of the team in order to minimise the risk of error. While challenging, it is also great to work alongside a team with the common goal of ensuring any chemotherapy supplied is thoroughly screened, precisely manufactured and safely administered to patients waiting on the ward.

Although I still get nervous holding a vial of medicine worth more than my yearly rent in Dublin!

This is one of the great benefits to working as a hospital pharmacist, something I have experienced across all of the areas I've mentioned, the sense of teamwork and being part of a department that comprises pharmacists, pharmaceutical technicians, pharmacy aides, administrative staff and porters – all striving for



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their collective actions to make a positive impact on the care of patients within our hospital.

Yet, like all careers, hospital pharmacy comes with its challenges too. Although I'm relatively new to its world, some of these have certainly crossed my mind more than once.

#### Dealing with Time Pressures

From clinical pharmacy, to medicines information, to aseptic compounding; we are routinely put under substantial time pressure; often juggling the responsibility of multiple wards with long lists of patients to see.

Time pressure is no stranger to anyone working any job; but what often suffers in its wake is the time needed to speak with a patient about their medicines – something which can really make a difference to someone's experience of hospital once they leave for home. I'd like to see this improve with an increased employment and utilisation of hospital pharmacists in Ireland.

This is the major reason why (aside from my own anecdotal impatience

at answering that much-loved question) I believe in an increased awareness of hospital pharmacy throughout the general public. The services I've described are currently at a different standard across all Irish hospitals, depending on those old familiar factors of budgeting, resources and employment.

As a profession we are currently in the process of standardising the structure of our vocation; how we are trained and utilised in Irish hospitals, because we know the benefits of our contribution to a patient's hospital journey.

With that, being a hospital pharmacist is a career path that is challenging, but ultimately rewarding; a path I hope evolves to meet the needs of an evolving Irish health service in terms of development and expansion. For me, it has been an interesting and gratifying experience so far; I hope I've shed a bit of light on the subject.

As a final disclaimer, to those reading because I've directed you this way upon asking what exactly it is that I do every day, I hope you can forgive me.