

Charity offers financial and moral support to pharmacists

The United Kingdom officially entered recession in January, 2009, and many independent pharmacists are among those feeling the effects of the downturn. But help could be at hand from a perhaps unexpected source. Pharmacist Support, formerly the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's Benevolent Fund, can offer advice and support to pharmacists who face financial and other difficulties. It is working to raise its profile to let pharmacists know it is there to lend a helping hand. Rebecca Derrington reports.

Statistics from Pharmacist Support show that, in 2007, it gave out a total of £98,091 in grants. Just one year later, that total had almost doubled to £192,188. The charity says that 2008 saw the largest increase in applications for financial aid "in recent history". There was a rise of 45 per cent in people helped by the charity both financially and through its help lines with advice.

Pharmacist Support says that, with the rise in applications, there has also been a significant increase in the amount of money people are requesting. The value of grants is up by 50 per cent and grants of £1,000 or more have trebled, according to the charity's annual report.

David Qualter, Pharmacist Support charity manager, says this increase is related to the current economic climate. He says requests for financial aid are expected to increase in the future — "potentially 50 per cent more in the coming year" — as the economy remains in recession. He adds that the majority of people seeking financial help are independents and pharmacists working for or owning small multiple chains.

Mr Qualter says that the financial help that individual pharmacists are receiving is mainly being used for personal expenditure, such as on mortgage payments and household bills.

The charity says that it uses the Joseph Rowntree guidelines to calculate how much each applicant could need to cover living costs but adds that each individual case is looked at on a case-by-case basis.

Along with providing money to pharmacists, Pharmacist Support also offers advice on a range of monetary issues such as debt management and benefits. The charity has a contract with the Manchester Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) to provide more specialist advice.

Changing ages

The charity has also seen a change in the demographic of those contacting it for help. In

2008, there was a drop in the number of over 60s requiring aid and an increase in those aged 30-45 — perhaps suggesting they have been affected more than others by the economic downturn, says the Charity. It adds that this shift could also be linked to the recent "rebrand" and launch of the new website www.pharmacistsupport.org that the charity says has helped it engage with a younger group of pharmacists.

Mr Qualter says that the profile of those seeking help has "changed dramatically".

He adds: "A typical grant for us three or four years ago would be a widow of a pharmacist who died without a full pension needing help of £300-£400. But now we are seeing people with debts up to £30,000."

There has also been an increase in the number of pre-registration students requiring help. Mr Qualter says that one of the problems is that, because of the current climate, jobs and placements in areas near where a student lives may be scarce, so they have to move away from home and start paying rent and bills before they can really afford to do so.

A friendly ear

The Listening Friends help line is available for pharmacists to discuss, with trained volunteers who are all pharmacists, stresses and problems they are experiencing. Mr Qualter says that the majority of recent calls to Listening Friends have been concerned with workplace stress, the problems of getting appropriate break times and issues such as dispensing errors, particularly since the Elizabeth Lee case.

A volunteer working for Listening Friends says that, as well as pharmacists calling about such work related problems, they are finding a lot of calls are to do with the kind of stressful problems that "all people suffer from", such as "finances at home". She explains that the people working on the helpline have to "develop their listening skills" and to let the pharmacists who call in know that they are not being "assessed", just listened to. She adds that pharmacy can be a lonely profession, "particularly in community pharmacy", which is why a charity offering this kind of service is "always necessary".

The charity's annual report shows that calls to the helpline have increased in the past year by 60 per cent. These calls reveal a "younger element" who are finding themselves in busy work environments and being overwhelmed by the situation.

The charity reports that nearly 50 per cent of calls are from newly qualified pharmacists and pre-registration students. However, it also says that there was an increase in calls from people aged 31-45 years and over 60.



Pharmacist Support manager David Qualter: we want to support pharmacists throughout their lives

Pharmacist Support volunteers also carry out home visits, which the volunteer says is not about assessing the person but "popping along to see how they are doing".

Reluctance

The Benevolent Fund became independently run in 2006 when the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's Council stepped aside and a board of eight individual trustees was appointed. In 2008, the charity was re-launched as Pharmacist Support following a review which received responses from 1,000 pharmacists. Mr Qualter says that this was in part to modernise the charity and make it more appealing for people to approach them for help.

He says: "There is reluctance by some to come to the charity for help as there is still a stigma attached to seeking help from charity. We often get people who are very distressed on the phone saying that they have been elsewhere for help and this is their last resort."

He adds: "Our response to this is that we see Pharmacist Support as a service, an insurance policy for pharmacists. We encourage pharmacists who are working to donate money every now and then because it (the charity) is there for pharmacists throughout their lives. This money has been provided by pharmacists for pharmacists."

Charity future

Mr Qualter says: "Many people are surprised that we are here and the level of support we offer. We don't just do a 10 minute call and that's that. We try to provide a solution to the problem not just a quick fix." He hopes that the re-launch and marketing of the charity will let pharmacists know that "we are here to help".

He adds: "We want Pharmacist Support to be a source of support for pharmacists and their families throughout their lives."

Pharmacist Support can be contacted at:

General Helpline: 0808 168 2233

Listening Friends Helpline: 0808 168 5133

Pharmacist Health Support Programme:

0808 168 5132

Email: info@pharmacistsupport.org

Website: www.pharmacistsupport.org