“If you go to a really rotten one, you just don't go again do you?”
Locum community pharmacists and whistleblowing

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Focal points
- This paper describes locum community pharmacists' views on providing feedback on the quality of pharmacy services
- Locum community pharmacists felt that reporting concerns might compromise their employment
- Effective mechanisms for raising concerns need to address fears of victimisation

Introduction
Guidance from the General Pharmaceutical Council\(^1\) highlights the importance of pharmacists raising concerns about the quality of the pharmacy workplace that may cause harm to others.

It has been reported that locum community pharmacists may not report concerns for fear of compromising their future employment\(^2\).

Within a wider study of professional engagement, the aim of this research is to explore locum community pharmacists' views on providing feedback on the quality of services provided in pharmacies.

Method
Five focus groups were undertaken with locum community pharmacists between August and October 2012 in Yorkshire, the West Midlands and North West England.

A total of 25 locum pharmacists took part. Seventeen pharmacists were male, and eleven were under 40 years of age.

Nineteen of the pharmacists worked in a variety of different pharmacies, both independents and multiples. Six worked regularly in one or two pharmacies.

Verbatim transcripts underwent directed content analysis using NVivo software.

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Central Lancashire Research Ethics Committee.

Results
Most locums described how poor working conditions in the pharmacy influenced whether they chose to return to that workplace in future.

These problems included volume of work, stress of the working environment and understaffing:

“...In the end (area manager) found me some more staff but I've never worked there since” (FG1, female, over 40).

They acknowledged that providing feedback on poor working conditions was positive and a professional requirement:

“But then your ethics... I'm a responsible pharmacist, I'm responsible for the safety of these patients” (FG5, male, over 40)

Locums rarely provided feedback to pharmacies, however, about why they might not wish to return. Mechanisms for reporting concerns were not clear.

Many locums felt strongly that providing any feedback on their concerns would result in future bookings being cancelled:

“If you start kicking up too much of a fuss then you get labelled as a troublemaker and then that can affect your bookings.” (FG2, male, under 40).

The reality of these fears was described:

“My partner shut a (company) shop and the Area Manager cancelled all his future bookings with that store” (FG5, female, under 40).

Moreover, where issues were raised, locums complained that they did not receive any feedback on the outcomes.

Locums reported feeling powerless to influence change and talked of 'survival' in a difficult pharmacy environment.

“Locums are not empowered to make the clinical decision, they're scared of making those decisions simply from my point of view because they're scared of not getting a job again” (FG5, male, over 40)

Discussion
Whilst this is a small study and the motivations of pharmacists who respond to a focus group invitation must be considered, this research supports anecdotal reports that threats to future employment restrict locum community pharmacists' willingness to report problems in pharmacies.

It also suggests that locums perceive a lack of robust mechanisms for reporting issues and for obtaining feedback on outcomes. This runs contrary to General Pharmaceutical Council guidance\(^1\), which emphasises that reporters should not be victimised and should be kept informed of progress.

Whistleblowing policies are now required by all community pharmacies, but a climate of fear and powerlessness might seriously undermine their effectiveness.

Current workforce pressures are creating a more competitive environment for locums, which may heighten this dilemma.

There should be clear mechanisms for locums to raise concerns, ensuring that victimisation does not occur.

References

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