PRACTICE OBSERVED

GPs and Their Staff

Recruiting surgery staff

NORMAN ELLIS

Good recruitment and selection procedures can improve the running of your practice—for example, by reducing staff turnover. If you choose the right staff they are likely to stay with you and give good and loyal service. If you pick the wrong people they will leave voluntarily when they find more suitable employment, leave involuntarily when you decide they are not suited to the job, or you may even put up with unsatisfactory or indifferent standards of work.

Unlike large organisations the general practitioner cannot be expected to devote sizable resources to recruiting and training new staff. But the general practitioner experiences more acute difficulties than the large organisation if the staff he recruits prove to be unsatisfactory. Strong personal ties can develop among a small group of staff and any disciplinary action (which can ultimately lead to a dismissal) is often more difficult to take. It is only too common to find a doctor tolerating a poor level of performance from his staff simply because he cannot face the unpleasant and difficult task of correcting the problem.

Although the time spent on recruiting and training new staff may seem costly, it is often less costly in the long run than the resources that may be wasted when staff prove to be ill suited to their work. To neglect these matters almost always stores up trouble for the future.

Too often when a general practitioner is faced with staffing difficulties (which may even involve a threat of legal action) the roots of these lie in his failure to recruit the right staff in the first instance and to provide them with the training they require. These shortcomings may be compounded by an innate reluctance to manage. Early difficulties are left uncorrected, and unsatisfactory performance and working habits are allowed to persist

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and are thus tolerated by all concerned. The general practitioner's failure to act in these circumstances is often interpreted (quite understandably) as evidence of his tolerance of indifferent standards of performance and unsatisfactory working practices.

When a vacancy occurs

When you have a vacancy it is essential to consider whether the vacancy really needs to be filled, and, if so, whether the content of the job has changed. (Have there been any changes in work pattern, technology—for example, computerisation—or organisation since it was last filled?) You should also consider whether there are likely to be future changes in the job which require additional or different skills. A good way of assuring yourself that the job has been thoroughly reviewed is to prepare a "job description."

It may seem pedantic to write a detailed description of the job. Is it not sufficient simply to give the job an accurate title? Unfortunately, there is no easy way of avoiding the task of preparing an adequate job description if you wish to put relations with your staff on a sound workable basis.

The job description should describe the tasks and responsibilities of the job:

(i) Main purpose of job: try to summarise this as briefly as possible. (If you cannot identify a main purpose the job may need to be reviewed.)

(ii) Main tasks of the job: try to use active verbs, such as "filling," "answering," and "helping" rather than less precise terms such as "deals with" or "in charge of."

(iii) Scope of the job: although the "main tasks" may describe what has to be done, they may not always indicate the job's scope or importance. Under this heading you may need to emphasise the degree of accuracy or precision required and the number of people supervised.

The length and detail of your job description will vary according to the job. But it is preferable to aim at providing a clear and

conclusion over the phone or at the interview. The advantage of using an application form is that it is easier to compare like with like, thus helping with the initial sift of candidates. You, not the candidates, determine what information is included and the form may be a basis for the interview. The standard of completion may be a guide to the candidate's suitability, particularly if clerical skills are important to the job. But application forms do lengthen the selection process and add to your clerical and administrative costs.

Selecting the best candidate

For most vacancies you may want to receive written applications in advance of the interviews and to arrange a simple practical test. (It is common practice to test typing and shorthand skills.)

Your partners and you will need to decide who should be on the interviewing panel—if you have a practice administrator or manager you may wish him or her to participate in the selection of a receptionist. The extent to which the practice manager or administrator will participate in the selection will depend on the particular circumstances of your practice. In some practices the practice manager may carry out a preliminary sift of applications by a first interview, reducing a large number of candidates to a final shortlist. These shortlisted candidates are then asked back for a second interview with some of the partners. At the very least you should allow your practice administrator to express a view before a final decision is made. The likelihood of the new employee settling successfully into your practice depends to a great extent on the person who supervises the work and is responsible for setting the new recruit properly trained and made to feel welcome. If your practice administrator has helped in the selection of the new employee he or she will naturally feel more committed to him or her. Similarly, it is often advisable for the candidate to meet the rest of the staff before a decision is made.

References can be helpful but these should be used with care. They are often most useful for checking factual information such as details of previous jobs (length of service, absenteeism, time keeping, etc.). It is particularly important to check on the applicant's previous record of absenteeism and sickness. If you want an opinion on suitability for a specific job, a brief outline of the duties should be sent to the referee and a subsequent telephone conversation may be helpful.

The interview

Although most jobs are still filled by interview, doubts have been expressed about this method of selection. Despite its limitations, it is widely used and general practitioners will undoubtedly wish to use it to select their staff.

For your interview to be effective you need to do some preparation, and they will need to be conducted in an orderly and thorough manner. The interview need not be an overformal or elaborate exercise.

Three other points need to be remembered at the outset. Firstly, you should consider preparing a check list of the points to be raised. Secondly, you may inadvertently enter into contractual obligations (albeit verbal) either in reply to an unexpected question or by merely agreeing to the candidate's terms. Do leave an escape route by emphasising that the employment contract will be in writing and that it will cover all relevant matters. Thirdly, throughout the interview you should ensure that the duties should be sent to the referee and a subsequent telephone conversation may be helpful.

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lation to existing employees. Employers with fewer than six employees are excluded under the Sex Discrimination Act (although this does not apply to discrimination by way of victimisation).

Your preparation should include the following:

- (1) Compare the personnel profile with what you already know about the candidate. Are there any areas of experience, or qualifications, for instance, which will need to be explored or clarified. For example, you may decide to test typing, shorthand, and audio skills, and also assess the clarity of handwriting.
- (2) Plan your questions. These should probe the candidate's knowledge, ability, and attitudes. Some questions should be aimed at a more general assessment of the candidate. In this area you may wish to explore in some detail the candidate's domestic and family commitments—for example, children, elderly relatives, and even pets. How extensive are these? Are they likely to take priority over his or her work, and how often is this likely to occur? The health record will need to be discussed and you may wish to seek the candidate's agreement to approach his or her general practitioner. Ease of travel to work can be important, together with flexibility in approach to working hours. Few practices can work with a rigid attitude to stopping at a fixed time when the bell goes. Finally, the candidate's motives for changing jobs or seeking employment, or both, are relevant.
- (3) If there is more than one interview allow the subjects to be covered.
- (4) Provide an opportunity for the candidate to ask questions and anticipate the information needed to answer the most likely ones.
- (5) Be organised, allow enough time, avoid interruptions, and have someone available to show candidates to the cloakroom, waiting room, etc.

Poor interviews are usually caused by the interviewer being unprepared and unaware of how demanding interviewing can be. In these circumstances the interviewer may talk more than the interviewee and ask leading questions to which the answers are far too obvious. In addition, important aspects of the candidate's previous experience, qualifications, views, and attitudes may be left unexplored, so that a proper comparison of candidates cannot be made.

It is useful to have shown the candidate the job description beforehand and to have a copy of your contract of employment to show during the interview. Do ask the candidate if he or she has any questions about the job description. Do not hesitate to mention any demanding and important aspects of the job. It is far better for the candidate to learn at this stage than later about any aspect of the job he or she may not like. It is also advisable to show the candidates around the surgery, letting them see what work has to be done, before asking them to commit themselves to the job.

After the interview

After each interview is completed write up notes on your impressions, recording any points strongly for or against the candidate. This will help you to make your final decision, particularly if others participate in the discussion. These notes will also help you to monitor the effectiveness and fairness of your procedures. Your reasons for appointing or not appointing a particular candidate may be important in case you are challenged—for example, under the sex discrimination or race relations legislation. (It may be worth retaining your notes to refer to if a further vacancy occurs.)

When you have taken your decision inform all the applicants of the outcome. (It cannot be emphasised too often that if you have doubt about the suitability of your preferred candidates do not hesitate to defer the appointment and seek new candidates.) Your letter offering the job should say the date on which

simple description. (See appendix for a specimen job description: this draws heavily on an original draft prepared by the Association of Medical Secretaries, Practice Administrators and Receptionists.)

The job description is important because it tells you what kind of person you need for the job. It may be used to build a profile of the type of person you would like to fill the post.

The profile of the person you need

The profile is prepared by devising a list of headings under which you can classify the attributes of the ideal candidate for your vacancy. You may prefer to draft your own headings; those in the table merely illustrate how this might be done.

Specimen profile of the person to be employed as a receptionist

Necessary	Desirable
Acceptable bearing and speech	Impact on other people
Ability to type, to operate FAX, telephone equipment, to use word processors and general office work	Personable manner, bearing, and speech
Ready grasp of a point	Qualifications and experience
	RSK II typing, previous experience of receptionist work
	Initiative
	Can assess priorities and make decisions quickly
	Memories
	Other commitments—for example, family and domestic—are such that they would not be a prior commitment. Able to work flexibly in an emergency and to do overtime during holidays, absences and (if short notice) sickness absences of other staff
	Adjustments
	Steady, self-reliant, good at maintaining a pleasant and reassuring relationship with patients and the efficient running of the practice
	Health record
	Good. In particular, there should be no previous record of illness that might lead to an absence of days

- (1) Impact on other people: physical appearance, speech, and manner.
- (2) Qualifications and experience: education, qualifications, previous work experience. Simple and obvious matters to be considered might include clarity of handwriting, typing, and audio and shorthand skills.
- (3) Ability to learn: speed of comprehension; ability to acquire new skills, etc.
- (4) Commitment: what goals does the candidate set for himself or herself? Does he or she pursue these with consistency and determination? How successful has he or she been in achieving them? In particular you should know whether the candidate is seeking work to widen his or her interests—for example, to get out of the house, to have a break from family commitments. Family commitments, if pressing or extensive, can understandably soon take priority over work. Sudden absences for these reasons can cause chaos among a small staff.
- (5) Personality: emotional stability; capacity to work under pressure and to deal with stress; is he or she likely to get on with your other staff, the doctors, and the patients? Another factor which employers in the health sector need to be aware of is its tendency to attract applicants who have a preoccupation with illness (particularly their own ailments).
- (6) Health record: in general you should be looking for a good health record. A small practice inevitably finds it more difficult to cope with frequent or long absences. (In particular you will

need to be cautious about any previous psychiatric illness that might lead to drug abuse.)

The characteristics identified as necessary from an analysis of your job description should then be entered against the appropriate heading. It is often helpful to enter two levels, indicating what you would be looking for in the ideal candidate, and what you regard as a minimum acceptable level to do the job satisfactorily. In addition, you should list any personal characteristics or circumstances which would definitely be unacceptable; for example, you would not wish to employ a receptionist anyone who had an abrasive manner.

An example of a completed profile based on the specimen job description is provided below. How much detail is included in the personnel profile will depend on the job, but not always with the level of the post; for example, a junior post can have important requirements under the heading "impact on other people."

If the personnel profile is used as a basis for your interviews it will remind you to be both realistic and systematic. But it must be remembered that there is nothing precise or scientific about a selection procedure. By being systematic you will help to reduce the margin of error. Ultimately you must decide which of the candidates is best suited to fill the job. If after completing the interviews you think that no candidate is suitable, do not hesitate to defer an appointment.

Finding suitable applicants

Having written the job description and the personnel profile, you now need to consider the best way of reaching the "target group" of potential candidates. One method that is often used by general practitioners is by word of mouth, sometimes from introductions made by other staff or even patients. This has obvious attractions; it costs nothing and it helps you to recruit those people from the immediate locality who may have ties of friendship or family with your present staff and the practice. But it may have the disadvantage of perpetuating the existing composition of your staff and it might even lead to allegations of unlawful discrimination. There is also the hidden danger of relaxing your critical faculties and subsequently departing from your carefully prepared personnel profile. It is far too easy to be drawn into appointing someone about whom you feel reassured simply because they have been personally recommended to you, without having evaluated him or her against your criteria of selection. If this happens and your new member of staff is subsequently found to be unsatisfactory, the already testing business of dismissal is compounded by the family and personal ties with your other staff.

Many general practitioners have to recruit staff from the area in which their surgeries are located. Sometimes they recruit staff from among their patients. The problems of confidentiality are obvious enough, and at times it may be friends and relatives who pose the greatest potential threat to confidentiality. It is sufficient to emphasise this problem and you should ensure that all staff, particularly new members of staff, are aware of the importance of maintaining absolute confidentiality and that any breach of confidentiality will be treated as a serious disciplinary matter.

Local schools, colleges, and career services can provide many candidates who may be suited for your post; but if you recruit from these sources you will need to pay extra attention to your arrangements for training new staff. The local newspaper is often the most consistently reliable method of finding candidates, though it can be costly.

Application forms

You may choose between using a standard application form, asking for letters of application or simply taking down informa-

employment starts and cover the main headings of the contract. It should also refer to the employment contract which will be issued after the employee has started work.

Benefits of good recruitment procedures

Good recruitment and selection procedures are likely to provide you with the right people for your jobs. Your practice administrator or manager should participate in the recruitment. He or she will have to work with the person who is selected and probably play a major part in the training of the new member of staff.

Before you interview any candidates it is essential to analyse the job to be filled and to consider what type of person would be capable of filling it. By completing these tasks beforehand you can be more assured of fitting the right person into the right job.

Finally, having put this effort into the recruitment and selection of staff, you must endeavour to ensure that they are properly trained to do the job. Training is especially important if your new recruit is a school leaver or a person returning to work after a period away from it. (You may wish to plan for a period of overlap. If the new recruit is not using its full "quota" of ancillary staff a trainer could overlap with the present job occupant and the practice could receive its 70% reimbursement.)

I am grateful to Dr John Ball and Dr Ewen Bramwell for their advice. I am, of course, responsible for any omissions or errors. This article provides only a general guide to the provisions of existing legislation. It does not offer a definitive statement of law.

Practice Research

Evaluation of quality of contents of general practice records

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Abstract

The quality of contents of general practice records was assessed by retrieving clinical information pertaining to hypertension in 171 consecutive records, and the quality of communication storage was assessed by seeking evidence of tuberculin skin tests or BCG vaccination, or both, in 298 consecutive records.

There was no mention of urine analysis and blood test results in 43.3% and no record of fundal examination in 81.4% of the records of patients with hypertension.

Electrocardiography was performed in 67.8% and chest x ray examination was done in 65.5% of these patients. These observations have importance for patient care, education, and research.

The information regarding tuberculin skin test or BCG immunisation, or both, was not available in 78% of the records. Reassessment of the individuals, however, showed that 89% of the studied population had had the test or vaccination, or both. There was thus a deficiency in communication and storage.

Introduction

The importance and the need for a system collecting, analysing, and feeding back information has been recognised.¹ Despite our increasing awareness of the importance of high standards of consistency and reliability in initiating and maintaining patient records, the ability to create and interpret records is rarely tested.²

The problem oriented medical records and tagging have

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