

Why aren't young pharmacists fighting over this plum primary care pharmacist position? It's all about the money.

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Photo: Roy Antal

Situation critical in small rural town

Gordon Stueck has been searching for a full-time pharmacist to work with him in his rural pharmacy in Leader, Saskatchewan, since August, 2005. And he's still searching.

by Anne Bokma

As the sole pharmacist at Stueck Pharmacy—the only drugstore within a 60-mile radius—Gord Stueck's been working 70-hour weeks and dreads the prospect of getting sick because there's no one to take his place if he can't come in to work. (He once had to run the dispensary for three weeks through a bad bout of pneumonia because he couldn't find a relief pharmacist.) Stueck is tired of being the only one on duty and is desperate to find a pharmacist. But despite the fact that he's offering a respectable \$80,000 a year salary, plus a housing and car allowance—not to mention that he's one of this country's most innovative and respected pharmacists—he has simply been unable to find a pharmacist to work alongside him

in his drugstore.

It's not for a lack of trying. He's spent \$10,000 advertising the position in the national media and pharmacy trade journals, rented booths at pharmacy student job fairs and gone right to his most promising source of potential recruits—the graduating class of the University of Saskatchewan—to try to drum up interest in the position. But none of these efforts have been fruitful. The combination of a national shortage of pharmacists, pharmacy grads leaving the province for higher-paying positions, and the lack of appeal in working in a rural community have combined to create a situation where Stueck despairs of ever finding a pharmacist. "Sometimes I feel like giving up," he says. "How much money, effort and disappointment

can a person go through?"

Perhaps one of his most disappointing experiences was a recruitment fair he attended at the University of Saskatchewan last October. With high hopes that he'd meet some eager pharmacy students who'd be intrigued by the idea of working in an integrated team-based practice, Stueck closed up shop for the day to do a selling job to the students on the merits of working at his practice. When he got to the fair, his heart dropped when he saw the kind of big salaries and inducements large Canadian and U.S. pharmacy chains and franchises were making to the graduating class. "They were being offered sizable signing bonuses, cars and top salaries," says Stueck, noting that the U.S. chain Rite-Aid in particular was offering a \$20,000 cash signing bonus without even

requiring a job interview. "I'm there looking around and thinking, 'What the hell am I doing trying to hire someone here? I should be looking for a job here myself!'" He left empty-handed, his hopes for finding a pharmacist dashed yet again.

Admittedly, the one thing Stueck Pharmacy has going against it is geography. With a population of 950 (which expands to 3,000 when you take in outlying areas), the nearest city—Swift Current (population 14,000)—is about an hour away and Saskatoon is a three-hour drive. Most young pharmacy grads are apt to take to the big cities to practise their newfound skills and view rural communities as dead-end places with little opportunity for advancement—and even less chance for an active social life.

Of the 90 or so pharmacy students who graduate from the University of Saskatchewan every year, the majority move to another province, usually Alberta, and only about 30 stay in Saskatchewan, says Ray Joubert, registrar of the Saskatchewan College of

Pharmacists. That makes for a small pool of potential recruits for the 345 community pharmacies in the province. Joubert admits the "lifestyle factor" can be an issue for young people who may think of country life as unappealingly quaint. "There's the whole notion that rural Saskatchewan is getting older and depopulated and that younger people don't want to move here because there may be less opportunity for socialization," says Joubert, noting that economic issues such as a struggling farm sector and a lack of industrial diversification certainly don't add to the allure of rural communities like Leader.

Deeper pockets prevail

While attracting employees to rural areas is hardly a new challenge, what is new is the competition to lure them away, says Shannan Neubauer, associate professor at the University of Saskatchewan's college of pharmacy and nutrition. Pharmacy chains are offering to pay students' tuition in exchange for work commitment post graduation—and grads are promising to stay with one company for three or four years, she says.

"It's very difficult for students—who are struggling with tuition fees and student loans—to say no to these enticements. When it comes time for them to go to a career fair, they can be

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Photos: Roy Antal

Rural dilemma

His pharmacy has been cited as the very model for how a modern pharmacy should operate. Yet after searching nine months and spending \$10,000, Gord Stueck is still without a full time, permanent pharmacist. In his experience, new grads are flocking to chain and supermarket positions which offer hiring bonuses and gifts. In June, a new graduate will start with him on a temporary contract, but he's still looking for someone who's serious about practising true primary care pharmacy.

For more information, go to www.stueckpharmacy.com

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overwhelmed because the first thing people offer is money. I try to tell them that if you take a job just for the money, you need to think about whether you'll be happy in six months' time with the work you are doing."

Joubert at the College of Pharmacists concurs: "They are being tempted at a very vulnerable time in their lives."

Neubauer wants pharmacy grads to think about other factors besides money when they consider their career path. "Students need to be asking who the clinical leaders are at the company who will provide support and training, whether the company has any affiliation with a local college of

other healthcare professionals at the local medical clinic and long-term care residence, in addition to providing patient teaching and home visits.

Charity Evans can certainly vouch for the joys of practising in the environment Stueck is offering. The University of Saskatchewan pharmacy grad worked with Stueck for two years until leaving last year to pursue her Masters in pharmacy. She accepted the position at Stueck Pharmacy "because I wanted to begin my career in a site that allowed me true clinical experiences and the freedom to develop my own practice," Evans says. During her stint in Leader, she attended weekly rounds with the physician and nurse at a 36-bed long-term

(Check out the primary care weblog Evans kept while working at Stueck Pharmacy at www.stueckpharmacy.com/primarycare/index.html.) "I developed personally and professionally through the opportunities, experiences and support that are often hard to find in the profession of community pharmacy," says Evans of her time at Stueck Pharmacy.

For her part, Neubauer says she'd heartily encourage any new grad to consider taking on the job Stueck has to offer. "When I look at what he's offering, it's in perfect alignment with what the new generation is looking for—they want to be innovative, to be recognized for something they've contributed to, and to have a key

the Wyeth Consumer Healthcare Bowl of Hygeia Award from the Representative Board of Saskatchewan Pharmacists, the Innovative Practice Award from the Canadian Pharmacists Association, a Commitment to Care Award for Patient Care from *Pharmacy Practice* and a Pharmacist of the Year designation from the Saskatchewan Pharmaceutical Association.

While potential candidates may be leery about moving to an isolated rural area, the irony is that these types of communities often afford more opportunities for pharmacists to really use their patient care skills and to work collaboratively with other health professionals. As the only pharmacist in town, Stueck is an integral part of the healthcare scene, working closely with the town's three physicians and single nurse practitioner to deliver patient care. In fact, he's generally on call 24-7 to help in case of pharmacy-related emergencies. "It can be jarring to be called at 2:30 a.m. because they are having problems with the morphine pump at the hospital, but that's just the sort of thing you do in small towns," he says. "The advantage of working in a town like this is you really get to make a difference. You are a major point of contact in the healthcare system."

But as the only pharmacist for miles around, Stueck feels a burden of responsibility. Not only can he not afford to get sick, he worries who will provide pharmacy services if something were to happen to him. "If I have a heart attack, who's going to come out here and serve these patients?" he asks. At 55, he says he just doesn't have the stamina to run the place on his own anymore. Yet

he still puts in six days a week—he feels guilty if he closes the pharmacy doors on Saturday because he feels an obligation to his patients to be available to them. "I come to work in the dark and go home in the dark. I'm only human and I'm tired."

Stueck has even thought about selling the pharmacy, but Leader is too small a market to interest the chains and franchises. And pharmacy grads have no interest in owning a business like his. "Why would they, when they can earn \$100,000 to \$150,000 a year and only have to work 40 hours a week? Why would they put themselves through what I'm going through?"

His only hope, as he sees it, is to find a pharmacist. So he takes every opportunity he can to talk about the professional satisfaction a primary care practice like his can offer, and he extols the virtues of the town of Leader, where you can buy a decent home for only \$60,000 and membership fees at the local golf course are a paltry \$400 a year.

Stueck's even willing to accommodate potential job candidates who want to give the place a try for a few months—he's offering to pay their living expenses in the hopes that they'll be sold on the place. He's very clear about what he wants in a candidate—namely, a pharmacist who is looking for something more than the typical routine of dispensary life. "I want a primary care pharmacist who has moxie and will stand on their own two feet. I want someone who is confident out in public, who wants to work on a healthcare team. I'm not interested in hiring a dispenser or a technical person. I'm hiring for their brain, their drive. I'm hiring for my patients."

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pharmacy or health organization and ask for the evidence that proves the company is on the cutting edge."

That's evidence that Stueck can easily provide. In fact, Neubauer points to Stueck Pharmacy as the very model of how a modern pharmacy should operate. It specializes in primary care teamwork and documentation is integral to the practice. The yet-to-be-found pharmacist would spend 50% of their time in the dispensary and the other half out in the community working with

care home, attended and spoke at numerous provincial and national conferences related to primary care development, was sent by Stueck on a month-long study trip to England to learn more about its renowned primary care system, developed an interdisciplinary diabetes initiative that was approved for funding by the local health region, and acted as a preceptor for the Structured Practical Experience Program at the University of Saskatchewan's college of pharmacy, among numerous other responsibilities.

role on healthcare teams," she says. "He's doing exactly what I'm training new grads to do. And when you find the right connection and right environment to work in, there's no greater feeling than to go home at night knowing that you are professionally satisfied. I want our new grads to feel that."

Add to this ringing endorsement the fact that Stueck has received an impressive number of professional accolades attesting to his expertise as a pharmacist and business owner. They include