

The Context and Future Careers for Scientists in Health

Progress Report

January 2009

Introduction

The Science Council estimates that well over 100,000 scientists are employed in health sciences in the UK, both within the NHS or in related and connected services and support, and in health-related industrial and academic activities. Almost half of those who work in the NHS are termed 'healthcare scientists' and this in turn is spread across nearly fifty professional groups. Other health scientists are employed in the pharmaceutical and biotech sectors, academia, diagnostics and equipment, other commercial services and solution providers related to health delivery, in public health, animal health and in regulation.

The Science Council Science in Health Group (SiHG) believes there is a need to raise the profile of health sciences generally, to recognise the valuable contribution of healthcare scientists in all areas and to explore the future career needs of such professionals.

Significant effort is being made to establish coherent career pathways in the health service and academia for scientists, which encompasses education, training and career progression. Less well understood and examined, however, is the interface between the different health-related sectors and the ability of individuals to transfer skills and knowledge between them and have a career that encompasses experience outside the NHS or academia.

The Science Council SiHG has identified this topic as a cross-cutting project which urgently needs to be addressed. Since July 2008, Dr Eleanor Kennedy, an experienced freelance researcher and writer, has been talking forward the project.

Expected Project Output

The report, to be published in spring 2009, is expected to include recommendations on:

- How to attract individuals into scientific careers in health
- The elements of suitable career frameworks
- How to define and facilitate constructive mobility between different sectors
- What skill profile will enhance the contribution of the scientific workforce to healthcare, in terms of both capability and capacity
- How to motivate and support individual scientists to deliver and develop professional best practice

Progress to Date

The first part of the project has involved a wide-ranging scoping exercise to determine the general areas of concern and disquiet within the extended healthcare sector.

Thirty interviews have been conducted with opinion leaders from a range of different organisations and institutions including education, the Department of Health, the pharmaceutical industry, Science Council member bodies and academia.

The main focal points of these interviews, tailored to the interviewee, are the following:

1. Recruitment and Retention

How can talented and committed individuals be recruited from schools and higher education into the healthcare professions as scientists?

What are their perceptions of science as a career?

What is it that attracts individuals into a scientific career in health?

What are the main issues in recruitment and retention within the sector?

2. Training and Continuing Professional Development

How could careers for scientists in health-related sectors be structured to support effective health care?

What evidence is there that the undergraduate and postgraduate training is adequately geared towards directing skilled scientists into healthcare?

How can lifelong training be supported and encouraged within the sector?

Is there sufficient resource being channelled into continued professional development among healthcare scientists?

Is there a reluctance to fund and to encourage continuing professional development?

3. Mobility

Is there mobility of staff within the NHS, academic and pharmaceutical industry?

What are the drivers of and deterrents to mobility?

Does this mobility flow equally among these arenas or is traffic towards the industry more one-way?

4. Research and Innovation

Is new technology being developed and harnessed appropriately?

What are the new technologies that will impact upon the way that healthcare is delivered to the public in future?

At what levels can training for these new technologies be suitably incorporated?

5. Career Structure

What are the existing career structures within the healthcare sector?

How can effective career structures be developed?

How can this framework be built to ensure that all levels of healthcare science are incorporated effectively and valued sufficiently?

6. Morale

Is morale a problem within the sector?

Do insecurities about career progression, funding and service provision influence morale?

It is already clear that there are problems mapping the career routes of healthcare scientists. There continue to be concerns about workforce planning but greater emphasis is being placed on the mobility of scientists. Important issues on why the focus remains on gravitating towards industry with little emphasis being placed on encouraging flow back to the academic and NHS sectors are being raised at many levels.

In addition, the plethora of working groups and committees currently investigating these areas are of concern because none appear to be working cross-sector. There is clearly an opportunity for the Science Council, in line with its principles of working, to provide a pan-sector, cross-disciplinary approach by engaging a wide range of stakeholders.

Going forward, the project plan is to continue to seek out the opinions and views of a wide number of different professional groups and specialty interests and to gather evidence based on one-to-one interviews, focus group discussions and by individual and organisational survey.

The project researcher aims:

- to carry out a manpower survey to consider the current position and future demands of the health sectors (subject to funding support),
- to explore how the future needs of health services for professional scientists and for scientific skills might be met, and
- to examine mobility between the NHS, academia and industry

Get involved

There are a number of ways to participate further in the project:

Give evidence - contact the project researcher Dr Eleanor Kennedy (e.kennedy@sciencecouncil.org) to discuss any of the issues covered in the project

Complete the survey - a survey has been devised to gather feedback on an organisational level; this can be found on the Science Council website or by contacting the Secretary to the SiHG, Ali Orr (a.orr@sciencecouncil.org). A separate survey of Chartered Scientists working in the Health sector can be found on the CSci website (www.charteredscientist.org)

Funding Support - the Science Council will shortly be contacting stakeholders to request part funding towards the project.