



## Gender in NI pharmacy & the Power of Parity

2021 EDI Webinar Series: Part 2/3: Gender & Equality of Opportunity - 27 July 2021

Over 50 participants joined for our second webinar on Diversity & Inclusion in NI Pharmacy – Creating the right Culture, which took place 27 July on the theme: Gender & Equality of Opportunity. We were delighted to have in attendance NI Chief Pharmaceutical Officer, Cathy Harrison and PSNI President Dr Jim Livingstone.

[Lelly Oboh](#) (video 3:30 - 14:35 mins) kicked off the event with a powerful and inspiring testimony. She shared her journey as a female black pharmacist, highlighting challenges she has faced along the way such as pressure to prove competence, unconscious bias, childcare and other commitments outside work and microaggressions etc. She remarked, “I have got to where I am in spite of, not because of these...We need to flip the narrative and turn the challenges into opportunities”.

### The ABC toolbox for female pharmacists

To make that shift, Lelly pointed to the following recommendations in her presentation:

1. **Authenticity:** ‘What sets you apart can often feel like a burden and it’s not. A lot of the time it’s what makes you great’ (Emma Stone). Lelly advised to stay focused on our core values (who am I?); the purpose that drives us (why am I here and does it bring quality?); the added value of your unique perspective that can be used to best effect; and to always bring forward your true self.
2. **Believe:** self-awareness, focusing on our strengths as women (empathy, interpersonal relationships, social responsibility), finding others who believe in you and cheering each other along!
3. **Control:** choosing to have assertive, not aggressive, conversations, working with allies and finding good role models.

Lelly concluded:

*“As women, we need to collaborate more and not compete with each other. We need to form close connections and shared experience with women who have been there and done it. This is how we will break the systemic hurdles that prevent us from advancing our careers.”*

## Zero conflict between meritocracy and diversity

Gary Kennedy (video 15:45 - 34:35 mins), representing the Irish government [Balance for Better Business](#) initiative, provided the keynote address and reflected on his learnings, research studies, and experience having worked on several Boards:

*“The closer you get to parity, the better results you get in terms of business...Where you have gender balanced leadership, you have enhanced decision-making in the business environment.”*

He cautioned against ‘tokenism’, which is proven counterproductive and can isolate the lone female.

Gary observed changes in the work environment over recent years, which today comprises a better informed, better educated and more demanding workforce: *“People are looking at proactivity in terms of employers, whether it’s from ESG (environment, social and governance) criteria, sustainability issues, what they’re doing in terms of the culture of the company, diversity, inclusiveness, gender balance etc...That has had to make employers wake up.”*

Asked by Sheelin McKeagney, Chair of Pharmacy Forum NI, (video 1:35 - 1:40 mins), how can male dominated organisations change to introduce more female appointments, Gary advised:

*“One of the biggest barriers we have is a fear factor among the male community...there is this inherent fear that while the theory is right and they subscribe to it, they have to give up a couple of points in their own journey to facilitate that. Organisations have to really work hard to allay that fear factor...To get success in this area, if you can have a male champion, it’s night and day.”*

## Flexible working

As a working mother, speaker [Anna McLaughlin](#) (video 36:00 - 43:00 mins) and Pharmacist of the year NI 2019, picked up on Gary’s points related to her return to work following maternity leave, when full-time hours no longer suited. She spoke of her current job-share arrangements in conjunction with a fellow male pharmacist at MediCare, which their patients have adjusted well to, also appreciating the m/f choice of pharmacist support available. She further highlighted the benefits of working for two employers e.g. locum work in GP practices, in terms of skills enhancement and bringing greater added value to the employer.

Referring to the [Pharmacy Workforce Review 2020](#), Anna highlighted that of the 2,715 NI registered pharmacists, 55% work in community, 68% of those are female, 52% are under 40 and even more of a majority are under 30. *“We need to adapt to this and realise that full-time working isn’t a possibility for a lot of people...Employers need to embrace flexible working,”* she urged.

## Be curious, be confident

[Una O’Farrell](#) (video 44:46 – 58:31 mins) exposed the dangers of ‘imposter syndrome’ (not to be confused with false humility) that can be experienced by professional women, and which is characterised by a feeling of inadequacy that overrides any feelings of success or external proof of competence. Often the feelings are unfounded, which Una proved as she talked through the breadth

of her experience in various aspects of pharmacy gained since graduating, demonstrating the range of opportunity available in the sector.

Addressing the up-and-coming generation of pharmacists, she said:

*“Traditionally, it was aspirational to leave university and take up a full-time permanent role and status was associated with that. Times have changed...we see the rise and rise of a portfolio career, which arguably gives greater longevity in the field. Career to me is not something to be endured but to be enjoyed and that’s what I hope pharmacy is for us all.”*

Speaking of her experience in the PDA National Association of Women Pharmacists, Una encouraged women to be curious and confident in shooting for more senior roles outside of the conventional pharmacy box.

## **Equality Commission NI – key legislation and tribunals**

Frank Fleming from the [Equality Commission NI](#) (video 59:40 – 01:19) who spoke at our first webinar in March 2021, returned to give an update on sex equality laws related to employment – protections afforded by legislation, namely the Sex Discrimination (NI) Order 1976 and the albeit less successful Equal Pay (NI) Act 1970. His presentation covered pregnancy, maternity and indirect sex discrimination; equality in employment for women affected by menopause; sexual harassment; equal pay legislation; and the laws protecting employees who have undergone gender reassignment. He reminded participants that *“the Commission can offer preliminary legal advice to anyone who feels there may be an issue that they’ve had to face...People shouldn’t be afraid.”*

## **Supporting transgender people in healthcare**

Alexa Moore (video 1:20 – 1:34 mins) of [Transgender NI](#) offered insights into the needs of trans patients and went through a ‘trans 101’ on aspects of language do's and don'ts, outdated terms to be avoided, and health inequalities experienced by the trans community.

She commented on the unique and advantageous positioning of NI pharmacy to support this space:

*“Providing needle exchanges for those who self-medicate for instance. There is a massive issue of drug use and misuse in trans communities. Things like safe injection zones and needle exchanges are really important.”* [This is something Pharmacy Forum NI has advocated for in the recent DoH consultation.](#)

Drawing from examples around the world in the wider context of trans healthcare, Alexa saw a greater role for NI pharmacy to integrate into that process:

*“In Argentina, for example, there is a programme of informed consent for trans people attempting to access hormones and surgeries It’s the pharmacist who prescribes and monitors hormone replacement therapy, it’s the pharmacist that people go to for advice on different side effects etc. Because pharmacists are based in the community, it’s an easier way to receive that healthcare. There may be a disconnect in Northern Ireland where we have [only] one gender service...We are all*

*about integrated community care and meeting people where they're at. That's maybe where the role of pharmacists in the future can come in when supporting LGBTQ communities more broadly but also specifically trans communities."*

## **PASS**

In closing, participants were reminded of the Pharmacy Forum NI registered charity – Pharmacist Advice and Support Service (PASS) which can help beneficiaries in instances of unfair treatment such as discrimination, bullying and harassment in the workplace. See: [www.pfni.org.uk/pass](http://www.pfni.org.uk/pass)

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Our third and final webinar in the series will take place on 23 November 2021 focusing on dealing with disability (inc. mental & physical health) in pharmacy: Are we doing enough?

For more information visit [www.pfni.org.uk/edi-hub](http://www.pfni.org.uk/edi-hub) or contact [Roisin.Hughes@psni.org.uk](mailto:Roisin.Hughes@psni.org.uk)