

# State takes steps to avoid community service logjam

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CAPE TOWN: The Department of Health is planning to avoid a repeat of last year's scramble for community service placements for pharmacy graduates. Dozens were left in limbo as the state failed to allocate positions but prohibited them from working.



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Like other healthcare professionals, pharmacy students must complete a one-year internship in industry, academia or state facilities after they graduate. In addition, they are obliged to do a year of community service in a state pharmacy before they can register with the Pharmacy Council and seek a pharmacist job of their choice. Community service provides services to deprived areas, and includes positions in government hospitals, clinics, the military and prisons.

Last December at least 80 pharmacy interns were left without a community service posting, and it took months before they were accommodated, according to Pharmaceutical Society of SA spokeswoman Lorraine Osman.

She attributed the problem in part to miscommunication within the government.

"Although the national health department knew the number of positions required, provinces had frozen some of the posts, Ms Osman said.

"The problem was the worst for foreign graduates, because the Immigration Act says South Africans must get first choice. It was hard for them (foreign graduates) because they don't have the support systems that local kids do," she said.

The national health department publishes a list of community service positions each year in July or August, but gives the responsibility for allocating positions to the provinces. Pharmacy graduates must list five choices in their application. If they selected institutions in different provinces, their paperwork was relayed between provinces until a place was found, which slowed the process and raised the risk of documents getting mislaid, said Ms Osman.

The Department of Health's head of sector-wide procurement, Gavin Steel, conceded the system was far from ideal.

The department had scheduled a workshop with the Pharmacy Council, the pharmaceutical society, student organisations and provincial officials to try to iron out difficulties encountered last year, he said. It was also considering changing the regulations to allow pharmacy graduates to do their community service at selected private-sector sites if there were insufficient state posts.

Since community service targeted underserved areas, such private-sector placements were likely to be in rural areas, townships or at sites dispensing chronic medicines, he said.

Mr Steel said foreign graduates who had completed their internship in SA were fully qualified and could work in their home countries because community service was simply a local requirement.

"But where there is a shortage, any pharmacist that is willing to work (here) is welcome."

*Source: Business Day*

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