

STEPHEN KANE PENDER PHAR- MACY

Pharmacies, or 'chemists' as they were once known, have transformed over the past fifty years. No one grasps this better than Stephen Kane, owner of Pender Pharmacy, which sits at the heart of community healthcare on Gravesend High Street.

ENTREPRENEUR

Pender Pharmacy was founded in the 1960s by Jack Pender, in a small freehold unit on Milton Road. Stephen worked as a manager before buying the business in 1990. The purchase was high-risk, requiring a bank loan and putting his house on the line when interest rates were 15%. But it gave Stephen the chance to run a local business his way.

PANDEMIC

Born and raised in Gravesend, Stephen studied pharmacy at Cardiff University before gaining clinical experience in Dartford, London and Stoke. Family circumstances brought him home, eventually leading to the business purchase.

He describes the years up to 2020 as a happy career. "Covid, however, brought intense pressure to stay open and keep staff safe and healthy," he says, his bright, joyful face darkening for the first time. He escaped the virus himself, but the disruption to supply chains and the long-term shift in expectations have created lasting challenges.

TRAGEDY STRIKES

In 2022, a serious fire in a neighbouring building caused major smoke damage, forcing the permanent closure of the Milton Road pharmacy. With quick thinking, colleagues grabbed the computers holding the electronic records. With help from the Kent Local Pharmaceutical Committee, the pharmacy reopened the next day in a nearby GP practice. It took two years to secure its current home on the High Street.

GROWING PRESSURES

Stephen is honest about the challenges now facing independent pharmacists. Stock shortages are growing month by month. National systems do not always reflect the reality on the ground. He describes local healthcare structures as disengaged, although he speaks warmly of strong relationships with local GPs.



TECHNOLOGY

Despite these frustrations, he remains optimistic. AI is already assisting with routine prescription checks, freeing pharmacists to focus more on patients. Large hospitals are using robotics for dispensing, though these remain out of reach for most smaller pharmacies.

Stephen has no plans to reduce staff as automation increases. "They will be redeployed on more interesting and patient-centred tasks," he cheerfully points out.

FUTURE PLANS

While some areas have embraced the NHS Pharmacy First scheme, uptake in Gravesend has been slower, likely due to historical practices. He is hopeful the situation will improve.

Pender Pharmacy continues to offer a range of personal services, including supervised consumption. These face-to-face interactions remain, for him, one of the most rewarding parts of the job. "Treating people with dignity and humanity," he says, "always brings something good back."

Looking ahead, he sees pharmacies becoming more like small clinics, with services increasingly devolved into the community. He also believes the profession holds real entrepreneurial potential for the next generation.

COMMUNITY CENTRE

"Pharmacies," he says, "could return to their role at the centre of community life, alongside other trusted local services." But he is clear this will depend on public subsidy. In wealthier areas, pharmacies can thrive by offering private clinics, but in more deprived towns it is harder to make the numbers work. The NHS may need to adopt a model similar to that of the UK Post Office to keep services going.

Stephen's pride in Gravesend is clear throughout. He speaks with warmth about the changing diversity of the town and the people who live there. With the right support, he believes there is a real chance to address some of Gravesend's challenges and build something special.