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ELECTRONIC INTEGRATION IS CRUCIAL

There may be an uncertain future for community pharmacy in the National Health Service, in England in particular, unless every pharmacy is linked to the NHSnet and has appropriate technological support. This is a high priority in Wales and community pharmacists in Scotland have already been promised NHSnet connection, with funding available to achieve this (*Pfj*, 2 August, p139). The situation in England is less clear.

This lack of clarity underpins the Department of Health's attitude to pharmacy: it wants the services pharmacists provide to be fully integrated into the NHS, but when it comes to providing the resources to achieve that, it puts up a smokescreen and claims that, because pharmacists are independent contractors and part of the private sector, providing IT support is not its business. As a result, as the President of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, Dr Gill Hawksworth, said in her address (see p371) to the British Pharmaceutical Conference in Harrogate this week: "Often the commercial element subsidises the professional service."

What can pharmacists do to be fully integrated into the primary health care team? The answer is not much if they do not have electronic access to patients records. Supplementary prescribing for community pharmacists is a non-starter (after all community pharmacists who run clinics in GP surgeries are working as primary care pharmacists); similarly, repeat dispensing, medicines management and medication review depend on access to patient records, and efficient transfer of prescriptions will ultimately only be achieved electronically.

As the President said in her speech: "We are concerned that there is still no clarity on how community pharmacy is to be integrated into the crucial new IT programmes that the NHS is currently investing in."

Rosie Winterton, Minister of Health, announced further expansion of pharmacy services in her speech to the BPC (p372), mentioning many of the services that are reliant on electronic communications. Although she accepted that the IT infrastructure needed improvement, there was no announcement of any major investment.

The Department of Health cannot continue to have it both ways, and needs to make up its mind whether pharmacists should be fully integrated into the health service or remain semi-detached.

It can show its commitment to pharmacy so easily by providing the resources to give every community pharmacy electronic access to the NHSnet. The profession in England should not have to wait another year.