

Brave new world

How successfully the new community pharmacy contract will be implemented depends on a whole range of factors. The development of community clinical services will depend on the willingness of pharmacists and primary care organisations to work together to use pharmacy to its fullest potential and on patients choosing pharmacists to provide those services.

The ability of pharmacists to do their new job properly is predicated on one main development — electronic communication between all sectors of the NHS.

It all sounds so easy and straightforward. However, notwithstanding the appalling record of the NHS when attempts have been made to introduce IT systems in the past, the successful installation of a system that gives pharmacy that essential link with other parts of the health service may only be the start of a new set of problems.

This week, *The Journal* carries a contribution to **Broad spectrum** (p512) and an **Article** (p522) about some practical and legal aspects of the electronic transfer of prescriptions — arguably only a small part of the brave new technological world that could transform pharmacy. The development of electronic patient care records with pharmacists having appropriate and easy access to them will be much more significant.

One of the less than comfortable issues raised this week is easy to understand but hard to solve. How can a pharmacist be sure that a prescription has really been generated by the person whom the system purports it to be from? In other words, when a prescriber “signs” electronically, how secure will the system be? This week’s article shows how the use of electronic signatures creates systems that are far from risk-free.

Pharmacists and doctors will need to be convinced that the system for electronic transfer of prescriptions they are asked to adopt is not open to abuse (and the risks are at a minimum). An unintended consequence of the introduction of ETP is that it may change health professionals’ and patients’ approaches to confidentiality.

Devolution comments invited

Although health policy is a devolved responsibility to the administrations in Wales and Scotland, health regulation remains a UK power vested in Westminster. The Royal Pharmaceutical Society, as both professional body and regulator, now finds that some of its policy issues — covering professional matters — may be given a slightly different focus in the three home countries. So the Society is inviting members to comment on these differences and consider what divergence is essential and desirable. In this week’s issue there is a two-page document (pp543–4) seeking the views of members on a range of issues. Although it might be predicted that pharmacists in Wales and Scotland might be more interested in commenting, all pharmacists are encouraged to respond.

Editor and editorial director

Olivia Timbs
Tel 020 7572 2414

Deputy editor

Andrew Haynes, MRPharmS
The Society section
Tel 020 7572 2421

Managing editor

Graeme Smith, MRPharmS
Letters and other contributions
Tel 020 7572 2426

Assistant editor

Michael Thompson, MRPharmS
Editor — PJ Online
Tel 020 7572 2428

News editor

Harriet Adcock, MRPharmS
Tel 020 7572 2415

Senior news and feature writer

Clare Bellingham, MRPharmS
Tel 020 7572 2416

News and feature writers

Tom Moberly
Tel 020 7572 2417
Hannah Pike, MRPharmS
Notice-board
Tel 020 7572 2430

Contributions editors

Dawn Connelly, MRPharmS
Reviews
Tel 020 7572 2427
Lin-Nam Wang, MRPharmS
Continuing professional development
Tel 020 7572 2413

Production editor

Christopher Icha

Website controller

Gowan Clews
Tel 020 7572 2418

Personal assistant to the editor

Emma Kerby-Evans
Tel 020 7572 2414

Administrative assistant

Pauline Heslop
Branch meetings, copyright, permissions
Tel 020 7572 2422

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