

Time to relax regulations

Responses from the key pharmacy bodies to the Government consultation on skill mix are largely the same: the current strict regulations on supervision and personal control need to be relaxed if pharmacists are to be able to provide all the new services that the profession advocates (p323).

When it comes to the finer points there are some subtle differences and the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's response, for example, can be read in more detail on p341. However, the consensus is that if the pharmacist is absent for any time, detailed protocols and standard operating procedures must be in place to ensure that access to pharmaceutical services is not compromised and that staff left in charge are suitably trained to deal with the additional responsibility.

Since the consultation was announced at the end of last year, some pharmacists have expressed concern about the whole idea that they might in future be able to leave the pharmacy premises — even for short periods. This, it has been argued, undermines their patients' and customers' expectations that the pharmacist is always available for consultation. Another anxiety is that, as a consequence of relaxation of the regulations, technicians will gradually take over the whole dispensing process and, since they are cheaper to employ than pharmacists, pharmacists will eventually lose their traditional *raison d'être*.

Are these anxieties justified? The expectation is that pharmacists will only be absent for short periods. The Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee recommends that pharmacies should display notices indicating when the pharmacist will not be on the premises. Pharmacists should also be contactable by telephone if a patient or customer has a particular problem that delegated staff cannot handle.

The factor that seems not to have been considered is that absence from the premises will be entirely voluntary. If a pharmacist wants to continue working as he or she has always done, and is able to develop new services on the premises, so be it. But if a neighbouring pharmacist prefers to develop services elsewhere, he or she should not be restricted by out-of-date regulations that limit activities in the technologically driven 21st century.

Hold on to your hats!

Just when everyone was beginning to relax and think that the Government had had its main say on the regulation of the pharmacy profession, and all that everyone was waiting for was the Section 60 consultation, there is more turbulence in the air. After *The Journal* went to press the Department of Health was expected to announce another review of the regulation of all health professions — post Dame Janet Smith's fifth report of the Shipman Inquiry, which criticised the General Medical Council. Hold on to your hats!

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