

The elephant in the room

Now that the consultations on the reports into the regulation of medical and non-medical health care professionals have ended (p594, p601 and p619), the waiting begins. What will the Government decide next? It is unlikely that any official response will be published until the spring of next year and, since there was no mention of health care regulation in the Queen's speech this week, it is doubtful that any necessary legislation will be put forward in this session of Parliament.

The main aims of the reports are to improve patient safety (particularly post-Shipman) and to bring health professions into line with each other. In order to achieve these aims, both reports make a number of recommendations for updating the disciplinary machinery

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underpinning regulation that are, in fact, already met by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society.

The real issue for the Society has yet to be addressed: what exactly will happen to the Society itself? Will it continue to exist in its current form or will it become two separate organisations?

In its response to the so-called Foster review the Society does not address the issue explicitly. The report only asked the Society to clarify the separation of its regulatory and leadership functions (since there could be a perception that its two roles present a conflict of interest). It did not ask it to produce a definitive new

structure that reflects all the functions that the Society carries out and that will satisfy the Government on behalf of patients and the Society's members. That would be have been too tall an order for the Society since the need for clarification was only mooted in July this year.

The Society was right not to use its response to these two reports as the vehicle for raising such a momentous — and potentially contentious — issue as the reconfiguration of the Society's structures and functions. Moreover, in order for the membership to be able to make an informed decision about the future of the Society there are a number of steps that need to be taken first, and various options, their costs, benefits and risks all put in the melting-pot.

The Council will be discussing a potential way forward at its next meeting at the beginning of December. And, increasingly, members of the Society are beginning to air their views: we have already carried some letters discussing separation.

For at least the past five years, the possibility of the Society splitting has been the elephant in the room. But the political imperatives have changed and — now that the possibility is acknowledged — let us hope that the debate is constructive and serious.

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