

Let the Society be preserved

As the future for the Royal Pharmaceutical Society unfolds, and the implications of establishing a General Pharmaceutical Council and “a body akin to a royal college” for pharmacy sink in, *The Journal* wonders whether the Government understands what it is doing and realises that, rather than giving the profession a wonderful present, it has handed pharmacy a Pandora’s box.

About 75 years ago, the then government gave the Society the responsibility to regulate the profession. Over the years, the emphasis for the Society gradually shifted away from professional matters to regulatory ones — a process that accelerated over the past five years, post-Bristol and post-Shipman. By definition, regulation is not popular and the Society’s image among some members has suffered as a result. This poisoned chalice will pass to the GPC, which will probably be even less popular than the Society if the expectations outlined in this week’s **Broad spectrum** (p521) are realised.

Once the Society has been stripped of regulation and its attendant activities, it will be instructive to learn what is left behind. At the moment many pharmacy bodies are interested in joining forces with the Society to develop that much flaunted royal college-type body, although some have reservations about the part the Society may play (p513).

These reservations were echoed by Lord Hunt when he spoke to members of the All-Party Pharmacy Group last week (p513). Lord Hunt is, allegedly, a friend of pharmacy but his remark that the Society is not capable of evolving into this new body is out of order (unless the Government is prepared to put its money where its mouth is and agree to fund the establishment of both bodies). It is one thing for chief pharmaceutical officers to criticise the Society’s record; it is quite another for the responsible minister, who has the future of the profession in his hands, to make his views clear in such a forum. He should have told the Society first.

Who is to say that a new body would do any better than the Society, once it is divested of regulation? Who is to say that, once the dust has settled, the different pharmacy bodies have put forward their preferences for what they want a professional body to do for them, and the Society adjusts its governance arrangements to reflect those interests, it could not do a very good job for the profession?

The profession should strive to adopt the best features of the medical royal colleges, as well as some of the professional activities undertaken by the British Medical Association and other royal colleges such as the Royal College of Radiographers. There is no need to tear up 166 years of history and replace it with something — as yet of no substance — that looks good on paper but may not be that relevant to the future of pharmacy or, for that matter, sustainable. The Royal Pharmaceutical Society exists. It has a strong national and international reputation. Let it be preserved and its foundations built on, even if its functions and responsibilities are modernised.

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