

# Be more vigilant!

With so much effort being made by the leading pharmacy bodies to explain to the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency that pseudoephedrine-containing products are safe in the hands of community pharmacists, the small study recently posted on the MHRA website makes for disappointing reading (p541).

Conducted in February in the north east of England, the study revealed that pharmacists were not as vigilant as they might have been in preventing inappropriate sales, something that the MHRA — either at the behest of the police or with the force's prompting — believes can only be prevented if these products are switched to prescription-only status.

The Royal Pharmaceutical Society, correctly, wonders about the quality of the research (it involved two 15-year-olds buying cough and cold remedies). This research was conducted before the announcement from the MHRA that it was consulting about the switch (*PJ*, 10 March, p269) but after the Society issued a Law & Ethics Bulletin (*PJ*, 27 January, p114) warning pharmacists about the over-purchase of these products.

Nevertheless, pharmacists should put their houses in order. The pharmacy press has been reporting developments as the story unfolds, and publicising the fact that all pharmacy bodies are against the switch. That may not be enough. With the best will in the world, a Law & Ethics Bulletin, on its own, is hardly sufficient to change practice or reinforce good habits. The interested pharmacy bodies should, together, mount a major campaign to ensure that all pharmacists are aware that they must take greater care in selling products containing pseudoephedrine or ephedrine or, for that matter, all medicines that are subject to pharmacy control.

The MHRA has extended the deadline for the switch consultation to 29 June in acknowledgement of the high level of interest in the topic. Even so, pharmacy bodies are unlikely to have time to conduct their own independent research and submit it to the MHRA, although they could encourage community pharmacists to galvanise their customers into opposing the switch.

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## Government won't dare hand over NHS

Presumably timed to coincide with the announcement of the departure of Tony Blair, the British Medical Association has challenged the Government to establish an independent board of governors to oversee the management of the NHS. Apparently, Gordon Brown has some sympathy with this idea since it reflects his decision shortly after the 1997 Labour victory to grant the Bank of England independence — which is widely acknowledged to have been a success.

The BMA argues that a board should help keep health ministers at arm's length and stop them meddling with the running of the NHS on a seemingly continuous basis. However, would they ever have the courage to do that? There may be too much at stake in the NHS both financially and politically for any government to dare hand it over to a third party. The only hope is that ministers can be persuaded to stop meddling at a local level and ensure that national policies are fairly and equally implemented.

### Editor and editorial director

Olivia Timbs  
Tel 020 7572 2414

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*The Society section*  
Tel 020 7572 2421

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

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Tel 020 7572 2415

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Tel 020 7572 2427

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Tel 020 7572 2417  
Matthew Wright, *MRPharmS*  
Tel 020 7572 2430

### Senior contributions editor

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*Continuing professional development*  
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*Reviews*  
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