

Our Society's future: are you bovvered?

By Alan Rogers of Epsom, Surrey

When the Secretary of State for Health and civil servants suggested that a new "body with a role akin to a royal college" should replace the Royal Pharmaceutical Society as the professional leadership body, I suggested they should butt out of the Society's affairs and I appealed to members to prove that we are perfectly capable of governing our profession without being bullied. I called for members to pull together to create our body for professional and clinical leadership (*PJ*, 16 June 2007, p707).

In November, we were finally given the opportunity to do this when the Society set up the independent Clarke Inquiry "to determine what the profession thinks would be valuable in terms of services to be provided by the professional body". Nigel Clarke said he wanted "to ensure that we receive the maximum amount of feedback from pharmacists themselves." At the first London public meeting, only 10 pharmacists turned up and, at the time of writing, only 21 pharmacists had bothered to respond, along with 12 professional and educational bodies. Many of the comments are merely an exercise in Society bashing, with few constructive suggestions on how the new organisation should be structured and how the transition should be achieved.

Feeling somewhat sorry that Mr Clarke and his chums had so little reading material, I sent them a few suggestions. OK, so they covered 33 pages — which some may consider a little extreme — but am I alone in believing that the threats from Government and other external forces are greater than from our own Society?

Yes, our Society. We have become so conditioned to the Society dancing to the Government's tune that we forget that it belongs to us. Once we get rid of the regulatory albatross, we can take back what is rightfully ours. We can repossess the organisation in which we have invested so much, change its constitution, change its structure and change its ethos.

We have a unique opportunity to reshape the Society as we want — if we can agree, and if we can be bothered.

In fact, the Society has become what it is because we could not be bothered to hold it accountable; because only 20 per cent of pharmacists bother to vote at elections; because we cannot be bothered to call for a special general meeting when things are bad. The recent furore over retention fees attracted about 10,000 signatures on a petition, but only about 1,200 people bothered to respond to the formal consultation.

Of course, all the major organisations have attended formal evidence sessions with the inquiry panel. They are not members, they do

not pay fees, but they will get their opinions noted. Yet, for once, your views will be more important because it is your views as a paying customer that Mr Clarke has particularly asked to hear. With so few people submitting their ideas, the individual really has a chance to get his or her voice heard — if he or she can be bothered. It is no good whingeing afterwards about being stitched up by the big boys.

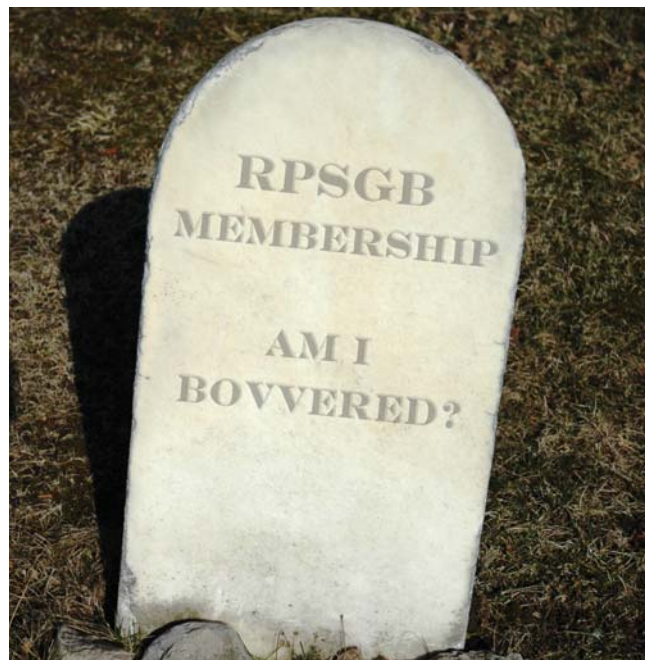
What is also worrying is that of the 21 pharmacists who have replied, 13 (including myself) have been on the Register for over 30 years. It is no secret that there are plenty of us opinionated old codgers out there, but the demise of the Society will not have much of an impact on our future. Mr Clarke needs to hear from the young members of the profession, who should be the main beneficiaries of the legacy left by the Society.

You must tell Nigel

We are only two years away from the break up of the Society and you have just two weeks to do something about it — the closing date for submissions to the inquiry is 31 January. You do not have to answer all of Mr Clarke's 44 questions; you can answer just a few. You can answer in instalments. You can write your views and you can comment on other people's submissions. You can even write to tell him that you have changed your mind. But please do something.

I am not an apologist for the Society. I believe it could have done a better job representing us in the past. But its greatest faults — arrogance and poor communication — have been exacerbated by our own greatest fault: apathy. Although the main thrust of its effort seems to have been on regulation, it has also done a vast amount of representative work for the profession in recent years. Sadly, the Society does not always succeed in getting this across, and few of us bother to find out, so we cannot identify tangible benefits as individual members.

So can the Society change? It will not be easy, but then there are no easy options. The smaller specialist organisations do an amazing job within their own spheres of activity and, certainly, have much to contribute to a new professional body, but do we really think that



they can scale up their operations within two years? Do they have the infrastructure, the credibility, or the expertise to represent 47,000 members of the profession rather than a couple of thousand enthusiasts? Surely the safest option is to redefine the purpose, constitution and structure of the Society, and to incorporate the best aspects of all the other organisations into that framework.

If we give up on the Society now, we will be cashing in our investments at the bottom of the market. The assets are ours, but if the Society is wound up, they will disappear in redundancy payments and fees to lawyers, accountants and advisers. We all got worked up about the cost of our retention fees but we should, in fact, be looking at it from a different perspective: can we afford to take the risk of losing our professional body for the sake of just over £1 a day — not much more than the cost of a decent newspaper?

So, before you join the "ditch the Society" campaign, think carefully about the practicality of creating a perfect new organisation within two years. Who has the capability? What will it cost? How do we achieve the transition? We have one chance and if we blow it we really will be in bother.

A highly successful marketing campaign in the late 1980s persuaded people to invest in the newly privatised British Gas using the catch-phrase "Tell Sid". With just two weeks to go, I am asking you to invest in the future of the profession. Think about what you want from a future professional body and "Tell Nigel". Do not condemn our profession with that ghastly alternative tag line, "Am I bovvered?"