

Tiered levels of membership needed until a good track record is established

By Christine Glover, past president of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society

As both a regulator and the professional body for pharmacy, the Royal Pharmaceutical Society has always been unique. This dual role has been both a strength and a weakness but, with the advent of the Government's White Paper recommending the separation of the regulatory function, this paradox is to go. The current question facing members and the Council is: what are we going to be left with? There have been numerous suggestions about royal colleges, representation and trade unions.

Most pharmacists associate the Society with inspectors, inspections, finger-wagging and (God forbid) the Statutory Committee. So most members do not have warm and generous feelings towards our parent body. In fact, many members have little idea of what goes on at 1 Lambeth High Street.

The profession has always been fragmented and this has, undoubtedly, made it less effective in driving itself forward and influencing policy at governmental level. Governments have been able to use these weaknesses to divide and frustrate the ambitions of pharmacy.

How to get to pharmacists

With the removal of regulation the profession can view the new body without the fear of inspection and discipline. It is essential that the new body represents everyone and that it cannot and must not be fragmented and thus find itself split by the various Government departments, national, health and financial.

It is also vital that the new body is free of the influence of previous Councils and their systems of working, which come with baggage, perceptions — some deserved and some not — cumbersome ways and a track record of self interest. All this must be parked and the new body must start with a clean slate.

It is important to recognise that the success of the new body depends on offering pharmacists something that is sufficiently attractive to make them want to pay a fee over and above their retention fee. To expect any number to sign up initially when the new body has no track record is unrealistic. There maybe a few hundred who are prepared to pay through a sense of loyalty but, until pharmacists can see clear benefit, some other strategy must be used to help get the new body up and running.

The only obvious way to get to pharmacists and to develop a track record is by getting pharmacy groups involved and getting them to use the new body's facilities and services. This may not be ideal but there is a

need to be pragmatic if this new body is to flourish.

So what will this new body look like? Royal colleges are made on the back of reputation for excellence and scholarship. They are focused on various areas of practice, such as general practice or surgery. There is, however, only room for one new body for pharmacy. Who is it going to represent? It has to be everyone involved with pharmacy, including pharmaceutical scientists.

There are those who believe that the new body must be for pharmacists only. This narrow approach will not help anyone. Pharmaceutical science is the jewel in the pharmacy's crown. For a newly formed organisation, seeking excellence and reputation, not to include all pharmaceutical scientists would be folly indeed. What is needed is a body that has something for everyone, and this is a tall order.

Moreover, the one thing all of pharmacy needs is strong leadership. The new body must represent leadership. It is the one thing missing everywhere in pharmacy. We may have some natural leaders but what do we do to nurture and support them? Leadership comes in many guises — professional leadership, political leadership and clinical leadership, for example — and all these options need to be nurtured and developed. The profession will be much stronger for harnessing and developing the talent we have.

What the new body could do

The new body must recognise that special interest groups are not going to give up their hard earned powers, monies or spheres of influence; nor are they going to be subsumed into another body, and they are only going to pay fees if there is something in it for them.

However, they all want and all need access to excellence in leadership, management, change management and negotiation skills. The new body could offer, and support, special interest groups with these, and the profession would be much better for it.

Let us take an example. Hospital pharmacists have little in common with community pharmacists so trying to represent one group will alienate the other. They are far better at representing themselves in matters of money and, indeed, practice. Pure representation is not really possible when the factions are so broad and diverse.

The new body has to be formed from people with vision: those able to think out of the box, and those who can let go of old val-

ues and grasp the enormous opportunities that are just waiting to be seized.

Tiered membership

So how do we get the people who will lead the new body? Those organisations that are fully committed to the concept could pay a full fee and be able to send a representative to the top table. Those organisations that do not want to join could have limited access to the new body.

So, for organisations, the first stage could be a facilitating level without a fee, or a minimal fee. The next stage could be access to courses for a larger fee. The final and full fee would be for access to courses and lobbying and policy development and a place at the top table.

Individuals could join at two levels. The minimum could give them access to *The Pharmaceutical Journal* and information facilities. On the second level a maximum fee would give them access to the top table via the ballot box.

It is essential that the new body cannot be overrun by one particular group or section and that self-interest does not prevail.

The new body could:

- Offer courses in leadership, negotiating skills and management change
- Tender for the examinations laid down by the General Pharmaceutical Council (However, because winning the contract cannot be guaranteed, whatever else it offers must be enough to sustain the body without this extra work.)
- Offer its leadership services to other health professionals.
- Offer support to pharmaceutical sciences
- Develop and formalise an extensive database for the whole profession

This plan would allow the publications department (a world leader in its field) to sit inside the organisation. The Society also has a good track record in pharmacy practice research and this can be continued and could provide one of the cornerstones for providing the much needed excellence to justify the new body.

If the new body is prepared to act as a facilitator and navigator for all interested bodies then it can become the conduit to excellence for everyone.

If, within eight to 10 years, the new body has got its act together and is delivering, then no self respecting pharmacist will want not to be part of it.