

# Why the pharmacy profession needs decisive leadership from the Council

By Ian Mullen, a pharmacist from Auchterarder, Perthshire

The issue of leadership is absolutely crucial to any debate on the shape of a future professional body for British pharmacists. The creation of a new organisation to provide professional leadership and representation for members creates an exciting opportunity to reform, refocus and possibly replace the existing body. Much of the debate so far has been relatively introspective, and there appears to be a worrying — although unsurprising — degree of apathy among many of the members of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society.

Much of this may be due to the lack of connection that many members feel with their Society. The rather grumpy tone of many of the letters to *The Pharmaceutical Journal* on a range of issues, over a long period, is a reasonable indication of the extent of this fractured relationship.

It would appear to be exceptionally difficult for a new professional body to survive and prosper in any meaningful way unless this disconnection between the representative organisation and those it purports to represent is addressed. The various initiatives such as Pharmacy in a New Age and Pharmacy 2020 are worthy and valuable but, apart from Council members and the committed few, how many members are really enthused or indeed show any real desire to be involved?

One of the major challenges for any new professional body must surely be the ability to attract a sufficient number of members to enable the organisation to represent the whole profession in a credible manner. If the new professional body were able to attract only 50 per cent of British pharmacists, for example, could it reasonably claim to provide leadership for the entire profession? There are already rumblings and rumours about the formation of a separate Scottish body, and if that breakaway were to occur would it not be likely to precipitate a similar situation in Wales? Would a wholly English professional body be viable as a separate entity? Perhaps it could survive in those circumstances, but one would have to conclude that it would inevitably be greatly diminished as a representative organisation in the eyes of Government. So strength in depth is important.

It is perhaps reasonable to approach the issue from a somewhat different perspective

and ask what would be the real loss to the membership if the Royal Pharmaceutical Society no longer existed?

If there were no Royal Pharmaceutical Society, would pharmacists feel that their issues were no longer being effectively represented at Westminster, at the Scottish Parliament or at the Welsh Assembly? How effectively and diligently are those interests currently being represented by the Society? A token attendance at the various party conferences does little more than deliver smiling pictures with prime ministers/ first ministers/health ministers for the sideboards of the particular individuals involved. Serious and effective lobbying of politicians requires a great deal more effort than that.

If there were no Society, would pharmacists be left exposed to the vagaries of an investigative media without adequate representation? Or does the present crop of anodyne press releases from the Society actually define the manner in which the written and broadcast media currently view the pharmacy profession? When the Scottish Government announced its intention to put an end to prescription charges in December 2007, the media naturally looked to those most directly affected for comment. In spite of the announcement being adequately trailed, pharmacists were nowhere to be seen on an issue that significantly affected patients and, indeed, the direct financial interests of community pharmacists. The media response was left to focus primarily on pharmaceutical industry representatives from the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry. Here was another missed opportunity to demonstrate that pharmacists are the nation's experts on medicines.

It would be simplistic to give the impression that the most important issues for a modern representative body are political lobbying and media spin. We do, however, live in a world in which the image of a profession or group must be given serious and careful consideration. One has only to look at how earnestly and diligently Downing Street, Buckingham Palace (and indeed the British Medical Association) take account of these matters to see how important it is for a learned profession such as ours to project the kind of image that influences public, media and politicians.

I do not believe that pharmacists are in need of a trade union — and nor should they. They are, however, in need of a professional body that will understand the day-to-day issues with which they are faced, that will cease wagging fingers, that will provide assistance and support with the complexities of modern professional life and that will represent them in an effective and professional manner to the media, to senior politicians and to the public.

The key to the effectiveness of professional representation is the quality of leadership. Politics, including pharmaceutical politics, may realistically be the art of the possible, but leadership requires vision and the ability to translate that vision into practical and pragmatic solutions. Leaders must demonstrate a willingness to listen, they must exercise judgement, they must be able to foresee the consequences of their actions and develop a capacity to enthuse others to follow.

In pharmaceutical terms, leadership must operate at a number of different levels. Whether pharmacists work in the hospital service or in community pharmacy, they will almost certainly find that the principal reason that primary care trusts, health boards and other NHS organisations find it relatively easy, on occasion, to devalue the contribution of pharmacy, is that they feel they can. The pharmacy profession does not make a sufficiently effective contribution to leadership within the NHS to make these organisations sit up and take careful note.

And, let us be absolutely clear, significant and decisive leadership contribution has to come from the governing body of the profession — the Council of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society — or indeed whatever structure may replace it. What is required is a determined and inclusive leadership effort that encompasses all branches of the profession. Community pharmacy is important for Governments but so is the managed service, and so, too, is the scientific branch of the profession. Perhaps it is time to stop being concerned with creating a plethora of new initiatives and really focus our efforts on the areas that matter to members.

The only reason that individual pharmacists will be motivated to join a new professional body is if they genuinely believe that it adequately represents their best interests. Pharmacists are no different from any other group of professionals; pharmacists want to feel confident that their concerns are being adequately regarded by Government, the media, the public and their fellow healthcare professionals, and that can be achieved only by effective leadership.

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