

MINISTER'S ADDRESS

Pharmacy now high on political agenda

Health Minister Rosie Winterton addressed the British Pharmaceutical Conference in Harrogate on 17 September. She made announcements on medicines management and technician training (see also p360). Clare Bellingham reports

Improving medicines management services to deliver the Government's vision for pharmacy was at the centre of Health Minister Rosie Winterton's address. She said she wants to work in partnership with the profession to achieve these goals.

Access to services has been improved in recent years. "We are providing improved access through repeat dispensing schemes, making it easier for people to get repeat prescriptions. This is, of course, particularly important for older people or those with long term conditions," said the minister. "The first wave of pathfinder sites is now under way, and I am pleased to announce today the opening of applications for the second wave of 40 sites." She added that the Government remains committed to having repeat dispensing schemes nationwide by the end of 2004.

The Government set up medicines management programmes to ensure that patients get maximum benefit from the medicines, she explained. "The community pharmacy medicines management initiative is now in its final stages with all patients having been seen for their initial interview. It involves nine pilot areas, 65 trained pharmacists, 44 GP practices and upwards of 700 patients. I await the results of this important study with great interest."

The minister added that the collaborative programme, managed by the National Prescribing Centre in Liverpool, now covers 530 GP practices and 700 pharmacies, in 106 PCTs. "By spreading good practice in the use of medicines, it already has the potential to benefit up to 19 million people," she said. "I am therefore particularly delighted to announce today the fourth wave of 40 sites. This means that 146 PCTs — almost half the total number — will have medicines management schemes in place by early next year."

Mrs Winterton described the introduction of supplementary prescribing by pharmacists as a "watershed". "I know that pharmacists have long questioned why they are not able to prescribe in the NHS, particularly as nurse prescribing has developed," she said. "Supplementary prescribing by pharmacists offers huge potential to improve patient care, particularly for people with long-term conditions, by making much better use of pharmacists' skills." She added that she would like to visit sites where supplementary prescribing by pharmacists is happening so that she can see it "in action".

"I am also pleased to see the great strides that hospital pharmacists and their staff have made in redesigning services around patients," she said. These include more patients using their own medicines, greater use of patient packs, increased safety

and reduced waste. "But we need to do more to share and spread best practice in hospitals. We have today published a revised medicines management framework for hospitals. And I am pleased to announce a collaborative programme, initially involving 10 sites, building on the successful collaborative programme in primary care." She said that the Government would use this experience to develop a unified primary and secondary care programme, focusing on joint decision making and seamless care across local health communities.

GOVERNMENT'S VISION FOR FUTURE

"I want to see community pharmacy firmly established as an integral part of the NHS family, innovating in service delivery, supporting patient choice and helping tackle health inequalities. Community pharmacy has two huge assets in taking this vision forward: the skills and expertise of its pharmacists and their staff, and its presence at the heart of communities with a tradition of ready access to all," she told the conference.

The minister said that she wants to see pharmacists delivering a wider range of services to patients, including repeat dispensing services in all pharmacies, medication review, monitoring services, medicines management, supplementary prescribing and as a public health resource.

"My officials will open discussions early next year with the professions, NHS and patient groups on a framework for independent prescribing by pharmacists," she added.

Mrs Winterton acknowledged that the right infrastructure is needed to make the Government's vision for pharmacy happen. "As you know, we are consulting on the reform and modernisation of the community pharmacy regulations. I fully understand that this is probably the single most important issue facing community pharmacy at the moment. And I can assure you that I am sensitive to your concerns and strength of feeling," she said. "I can promise that we will continue to give full and careful consideration to all the arguments — including those we are hearing, put powerfully and well, from pharmacy organisations. I can assure you that we will do nothing to jeopardise the vital role of pharmacies in the community."

The minister said that it is vital to make the best use of information technology to deliver pharmacy services. "Despite what you may have read in the press, I can assure you that we remain strongly committed to building a strong IT infrastructure for pharmacy," she said.

Evaluation of the electronic transmission of prescriptions (ETP) pilots has shown that ETP is technically viable and can poten-

tially provide a range of benefits including improved patient choice and safety. The results of this evaluation are published today, she said. ETP will now be taken forward as part of the National Programme for IT — together with the electronic patient record, electronic booking and the underpinning IT infrastructure, she added.

"To be able to carry out some of the enhanced roles and services set out in our vision, we believe that where possible, subject to patient consent and ensuring that confidentiality is maintained, pharmacists could have access to relevant parts of patient records. And they should be able to record their interventions," the minister said. "Of course, the sharing of patient information is sensitive. Patient consent will be critical and data will need to be appropriately recorded, stored, shared and communicated in a way that ensures confidentiality. We have recently begun discussions with key stakeholders to discuss the sharing of relevant information with community pharmacists. Informed by these discussions, we will issue a consultation document shortly."

Change is inevitable, particularly since pharmacy has been for so many years low on successive governments' health agendas, the minister concluded. "This Government wants to turn that around." She added that she is looking forward to working with the Royal Pharmaceutical Society and that although she could not promise to deliver all that pharmacy wants, she could promise to work in partnership with the profession.