

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

# Pharmacy has moved beyond crossroads

*In her presidential address to the British Pharmaceutical Conference in Harrogate on 17 September, Dr Gill Hawksworth said that pharmacy had moved beyond the crossroads at which it had been stalled for many years. However, some challenges still remained. The President also addressed the subject of modernisation of the Society. Clare Bellingham reports*

**T**he President of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, Dr Gill Hawksworth, began her address by tackling the issue of regulation. "The Royal Pharmaceutical Society has spent almost two years and a great deal of effort on a programme to bring our entire governance framework up to date. We intend to be a world-class regulatory and professional body," she said. "The Council has examined its powers, constitution and ways of working and has made hundreds of proposals for change. We hope that our proposals can be included in the new legislation that will be taken forward through a Section 60 order."

The President went on to say that the concept of regulation is changing. "Regulation in health care is the framework that allows the public to be assured that their safety is paramount. This means far more than sorting out the bad apples." She explained that it is also about managing the standards and processes that support education, registration and competence of a professional throughout his or her career.

"The Council's decision to pursue the Society's future as a regulatory and professional body recognises the complex, inter-related nature of professional governance," she said. She added that this broad scope of activity was not new for the Society: "Since it gained its regulatory powers in 1933, the Society has discharged them in synergy with its work as a professional body."

The President declared: "We believe that our proposals for a Section 60 order will allow us to exercise our wide-ranging responsibilities within a framework that is transparent and accountable and that has an appropriate level of public involvement."

## DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROFESSION

"Not so many years ago, a phrase we used to hear a lot was 'pharmacy is at the crossroads'. We appeared to [have been] stalled at that crossroads for a long time: government after government did not seem to know what to do with the profession. Certainly for many years, national health policy was being made with little or no input from the profession. But then the profession had no clear vision of where it wanted to go," the President said. The Society set out to remedy this situation and, after consulting members, developed a vision for pharmacy, she explained. It then worked to make the vision a reality, improving the Society's influence on public policy at both strategic and implementation levels across the UK.

"Today I think it is true to say that we have shifted into gear and pulled away from

the crossroads. We are on our way," she said. "We now have NHS pharmacy plans in all three countries of Great Britain, and we have a recognition that pharmacists and their skills are key to the success of patients managing their treatment." She added: "Pharmacists can be proud that they have helped to shape a future where they can make an even greater contribution to the health care of the nation."

## CONCERNS STILL REMAIN

However, pharmacy still has its concerns. Although pharmaceutical advisers and pharmacist members of primary care trust professional executive committees have been recognised as having a key role in the latest pharmacy strategy document 'A vision for pharmacy in the new NHS', more needs to be done. "We are aware that there are pharmacist members of these committees in only about half of the PCTs in England. Of course the situation is much happier in Wales and in Scotland where pharmacist input is much more consistent," said the President. "We know that where pharmacist members are in place they provide a valuable source of expertise. We would like to see pharmacist members of the professional executive committees in all PCTs."

Another concern at a primary care level is that pharmaceutical advisers are not getting enough support. "We would like reassurance that training and support will be provided for these people to help them in their difficult task of making the 'vision' a reality. In particular, we would mention that few pharmacists have had access to the excellent leadership training provided by the NHS Leadership Centre in spite of reassurances in the past."

The President also mentioned Government's response to the Office of Fair Trading report. "Unfortunately, as you are aware, the consensus within pharmacy was that this latter package of measures was not as balanced as might have been hoped," she said.

Although the Society is not involved in matters relating to NHS dispensing contracts, the President said she is concerned that the public has access to a safe and effective quality pharmacy service. "The Society would be concerned if any new development were to mean that people who lived in certain less commercially attractive areas no longer had local access to a pharmacist," she warned. "The consultation document does not provide the reassurance we seek that universal access to pharmacy would not be damaged by the proposals as set out."

She went on: "Community pharmacies

are NHS health care premises that are run as private sector businesses. For too long this seems to have been considered as some sort of image problem. It has been allowed to colour thinking and relationships in a way that is not helpful to what we are all trying to achieve." The President said that she believes that in community pharmacy, the public benefits from a successful public-private partnership. "Often the commercial element subsidises the professional service. Community pharmacies are indeed commercial enterprises but their activities are subject to statutory regulations and they are required to operate according to a professional code of ethics specifically to secure the public interest," she stressed. "I cannot see how community pharmacy can be thought of as just another business sector. Let us not forget that pharmacies service patients as well as consumers."

Finally, pharmacy has concerns about the information technology agenda. The President hopes that community pharmacies will be connected to the NHSnet. "We accept that there are stakeholder issues to deal with. What we don't understand is the delay in tackling these issues so that community pharmacy can become truly established as an integral part of the NHS family." She added: "We are concerned that there is still no clarity on how community pharmacy is to be integrated into the crucial new IT programmes that the NHS is currently investing in," she said. In particular, the President wants to know how pharmacy will be included in the new integrated care record service.

However, the President concluded her address positively: "Pharmacy wants to move forward on behalf of patients. Please give us the framework to do so."