

How women can make the most of opportunities available in public life

Christine Heading, of the National Association of Women Pharmacists, reports from a meeting at which participants heard that it was becoming easier for women to serve on numerous different public bodies

Whether your ambitions are to serve as a museum trustee or as a peer of the realm, there has never been a better time to seek public office, especially if you are female. Although appointments to public posts always depend on merit, a plethora of quotas and targets influencing non-elected appointments should mean that it is easier for women to be considered. This was one of the key messages from the National Association of Women Pharmacists' "Women in public life event".

During 2003, there was much debate within pharmacy over the merits of increasing the lay membership of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's Council, but rather than become embroiled in the debate, NAWP decided to address the reciprocal issue of how pharmacists could get themselves appointed to the increasing number of boards and councils that require lay or non-executive members. Since, historically, women have been under-represented on such bodies, and because NAWP has a commitment to help its members develop their personal potential both inside and outside health and welfare-related spheres, the association chose to focus primarily on the appointment of women. This is an issue that the Department of Trade and Industry has been addressing, and one which requires attention if UK Government targets of 35 to 50 per cent female membership of their own agencies is to be met.

Take the initiative

In her opening remarks, Madeleine Keyworth, chairman of Doncaster and South Humber Healthcare NHS Trust, who was chairing the event, emphasised the shift that has occurred over recent years with regard to appointments within NHS bodies. Whereas in the past, candidates tended to wait to be invited to apply for posts to local and regional committees, the norm is now for candidates to take the initiative themselves. NHS trusts represent only one of many ways in which pharmacists can contribute to public life, and individuals should be prepared to look outwards, away from their own profession, to see what contribution they could make. Charities, trusts, government agencies, governing boards, the courts, professional coun-

cils, public liability companies and others are all anxious to appoint competent lay and non-executive men and women to improve their corporate governance.

Considerable personal rewards

In addressing the advantages and disadvantages of contributing to public life, Phillida Entwistle, a Privy Council nominee member of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's Council, explained that outside the commercial world appointees should expect modest or an absence of payment. Although payment of a higher fee can be an incentive for certain posts, it can be easier to resign from a body about which you have concerns, when no loss of income is involved. Assuming you have joined a body that you believe to be sound and ethical, the personal rewards are usually considerable. With female representation within elected political bodies stuck at an astonishingly low level, service as a public appointee can offer a realistic way for women to make a contribution to the public life of the country.

The issue of the integrity of specific boards, trusts and related committees was developed further by Janet Cummins, chief executive, CF Appointments. She stressed that candidates seeking a specific appointment must exercise due diligence in checking the probity and future prospects of bodies they seek to join. This was especially important for senior appointments such as chairmanships and, even in the public sector, the problems being faced by an organisation might be less than obvious. She too believed that in most cases appointments were of benefit to both board and appointee. Additionally, she agreed that there were numerous options for appointments to all sorts of organisations, and that candidates should not hesitate to put themselves forward.

Procedural changes

Sally Lau, Welsh Centre for Pharmacy Postgraduate Education tutor, detailed the changes in appointment procedures and duties that she had experienced while serving as a General Commissioner of Income Tax. These days, applications to become a GC are made in a similar way as those to the magistracy, but duties are less onerous. Ms Lau believes that she was one of the last appointees to have been invited to apply by the "tap on the shoulder" system, although she nevertheless had to make her application formally. She

reassured the meeting that the competence of appointees such as herself along with that of newer appointees, was monitored via a regular appraisal system. This system is used by many bodies, and in part copes with the thorny issue of age. Although some bodies will not appoint individuals above the age of 60 years, many will appoint up to the age of 65. Others go beyond 65, and safeguard themselves using fixed term but renewable appointments, as well as appraisal.

Further information

So far as procedures to follow were concerned, all four guest contributors to the meeting stressed the ease with which information could be accessed. Numerous websites and printed literature provide information, and for many types of post, candidates are invited to register an interest or join a database, which would serve as a reservoir of candidates for future specific posts. Public posts are also advertised routinely in the national press and some, by requirement, are advertised locally as well.

Pharmacists (male or female) wanting details of how they can access information on opportunities are asked to contact: enquiries@nawp.org.uk or send a stamped, addressed envelope to Dr Christine Heading, 11 Kingsend, Ruislip, Middlesex HA4 7DD.

History of pharmacy

The British Society for the History of Pharmacy, founded in 1967, aims to promote historical research related to pharmacy and to publish research work and other items of interest in its quarterly journal, *Pharmaceutical Historian*. The society holds meetings and an annual conference and organises visits to places of pharmaceutical interest. Further information is available at www.bshp.org.

Membership of the society is open to individuals for an annual subscription of £20. Non-pharmacist members are welcome. Special subscription rates are available for overseas and corporate membership.

All inquiries concerning membership, subscriptions or the society's activities should be addressed to the British Society for the History of Pharmacy, 840 Melton Road, Thurmaston, Leicester LE4 8BN (tel 0116 264 0083; fax 0116 264 0141; e-mail bshp@associationhq.org.uk).

"Women in public life" was organised by the **National Association of Women Pharmacists**, and took place in London on 17 February