

2005 — it is time for technicians to register an interest in their future

By Darren Leech

During 2005, pharmacy technicians will have their first chance to register with the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, with registration set to become compulsory from 2007. From many technicians' point of view, this has been "a long time coming" — the Association of Pharmacy Technicians UK (APTUK) has campaigned for such a move for all of its 52-year formal existence.

In recent years, pharmacists in the hospital sector and at the Society itself have warmed to, and largely supported, the idea of mandatory registration for pharmacy technicians. However, this has not always been the case. It is also fair to say that positive sentiments on this issue are still not universally expressed throughout pharmacy's wider political spectrum.

Now that technicians, despite the opposition, have reached this milestone, it is important that they take the time to think about what registration does (and also does not) mean for them, both individually in whatever field they practice, and collectively.

The benefits of registration are a well-trodden debate, and going into detail about them is not the purpose of this piece. Ironically, however, many of these benefits are now being extolled by pharmacy organisations that have previously rejected the need for registration outright. That aside, once the mandatory register is in place there will be a single, clear and unambiguous standard for entry as a technician into the workforce. It will also mean that pharmacy technicians are

regulated against a clear ethical framework for practice. All of this is to be welcomed, on behalf of technicians themselves, the organisations they work for and, moreover, the patients they play a part in caring for.

—

There is a clear and fundamental need to ensure that there is strong, effective professional representation for all technicians, including those working in hospitals

—

What registration does not mean, however, is that technicians will be represented by the Society. Unlike their pharmacist colleagues (as members), technicians (as registrants) will need to look elsewhere to ensure their views are heard. Although this in itself is not a particular concern — most other health professionals have distinct bodies to regulate and represent them — many technicians seem to be unaware of the nuances of the Society's function as far as they are concerned. They therefore run the risk of being poorly represented, unless they take the opportunity to register an interest in their future and join up with APTUK.

There is a clear and fundamental need to ensure that there is strong, effective professional representation for all technicians, including those working in hospitals. That way, technicians' individual views will be considered and their collective voice recognised and heard at all levels. All of this is particularly important given the current interest in pharmacy technicians, not only in the "pharmacy technician world", but in the wider pharmacy profession and beyond.

It is also imperative that technicians know where to find information that has been tailored to meet their needs about subjects such as Agenda for Change, continuing professional development and whether they should hold liability insurance. The latter issue is particularly important because, although a lot of advice is available on this topic, much of it has been created on behalf of other stakeholders, such as those who employ pharmacy technicians or represent employers' interests or those of their insurers, or emanates from well-meaning but non legally-qualified colleagues.

So what is being done to ensure that technicians understand the need to engage with those who represent them? In a recent joint statement, the Society and APTUK outlined a commitment to ensuring effective professional representation for pharmacy technicians through APTUK.

It is too early to tell whether initiatives such as the joint statement have helped get the message across. One glimmer of hope is that pharmacy technicians seem at least to know that they want such representation. Over the past five or six years, I have spoken to literally hundreds of pharmacy technicians from all

backgrounds and all areas of practice. There has been a unanimous response of "yes" among them to the following three questions:

- Do you think that your views as pharmacy technicians are important to the development of pharmacy services in the future?
- Do you think that pharmacy technicians should have a say in what happens in pharmacy and the health sector as a whole?
- Do you think that pharmacy technicians should have a strong professional organisation for engaging, representing and communicating their views to their regulator, to their employers and to policy makers?

The tests for pharmacy technicians over the next few years will be whether they recognise the critical importance of having effective representation and whether their actions on this point match the passion of their words.

As they register with their new regulatory body, I sincerely hope that pharmacy technicians will start taking a greater interest in both their own future and that of the pharmacy profession as a whole — a profession to which, after a long and hard fought 52 years, they will at last be able to say they belong.

References

1. Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain and the Association of Pharmacy Technicians UK. Clarity on roles of organisations. *Pharmacy Technician* 2004;Autumn:16-17.

Darren Leech is president of the Association of Pharmacy Technicians UK