

Hemant Patel reflects on his presidency

Dawn Connelly talks to Hemant Patel, who retires as President of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society next week, about his hopes for the future and his reflections on the past 15 years on the Council, including four terms as President

As President Hemant Patel prepares to retire after 15 years on the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's Council, he seems genuinely emotional at the prospect. However, he is confident that the groundwork has been laid for a successful professional leadership body to emerge.

One thing is clear as he reflects on his time as President is that he is a glass half-full type of man. "If you allow low points to get to you, you not only become ineffective but you place burdens on others around you," he says. "One thing I am good at is dusting myself off and standing up. My focus is very much on outcomes and futures."

It is this focus on outcomes that has sometimes brought him into conflict with Society staff and Council members, he admits. "The culture at the Society is very much about process instead of outcomes. I am not the kind of person who will allow things to drift and, from time to time, I have had to push hard," he says.

Mr Patel recognises that the world is changing at a fast pace and that it is not going to slow down to accommodate the profession. "I wanted the Society to be a huge change agent, so that we led the profession by showing respect for individual pharmacists and persuading them to change."

An interest in widening the clinical role of pharmacists was one of the reasons that first led Mr Patel to stand for Council in 1993. "I had a deep concern for fellow pharmacists and wanted to help them. But also I felt I had something to offer in terms of vision, commitment and energy. And I was very interested in the clinical agenda," he explains.

Another reason was his strong belief that it is the duty of pharmacists in each generation to bequeath to the next generation the profession in a better state than the one in which they found it.

After five years on the Council, Mr Patel was motivated to stand for President because plans emerged from a fellow Council member's review (The Banks report, 1998) that did not fit with his own vision of an organisation that serves its members, he explains.

In 2005, he stood for President again, with the aim of guiding the profession towards a clinical world. "I also wanted to put brakes on the way that resources were consumed to develop regulatory roles at the expense of professional support," he adds.

Bearing this in mind, Mr Patel is glad that the Government's White Paper on the regulation of health professionals, published in 2007, will lead to the separation of the Society's professional and regulatory roles. "Now the Society has got a clear remit. In the past, we have tried to serve two masters —



Hemant Patel: to retire next week

the Government and the members — and the Government always won," he says.

Trying to establish the professional leadership role has not been easy, Mr Patel admits. "Innovation is hugely important. I would like to see the Society develop a leadership and innovation culture that resonates well with the public and members of the Society," he explains.

For this to come to fruition, he says, the Society needs to think in a collaborative way with the rest of the pharmacy team. The branches need to work in synergy with local pharmaceutical committees, primary care organisations, hospitals, schools of pharmacy and social services, he stresses. "There is devolvement of money at local level and we really need to support each member at a local level to realise his or her full potential. The Society is capable of doing that but it requires commitment from the Society and an adequate and timely response from the members."

One of the high points of Mr Patel's presidency came from the recognition given to the Society in the recent White Paper devoted to future pharmacy services in England. "The letter from the minister thanking me for the support given by the Society and myself was very much appreciated," he smiles.

Another high point was what he refers to as a successful conclusion to the challenges imposed by the regulatory White Paper of 2007 and the subsequent Carter report. "There is still a lot of work to be done in terms of the implementation of the Clarke report... but I am confident that the groundwork that has been done will ensure that we have a successful professional leadership body, free from government influence and totally dedicated to serving its members," he says.

Pharmacy is an enormous part of Mr Patel's life and he has no plans to let it go just yet. "I still want to be a pharmacist and a member of the Society. It means a huge amount to me," he says. He would like to have some role in the future professional body, subject to membership support, he reveals. But he adds quickly that this would not be as an officer: "Supporting new leaders is important."

Given the opportunity he would also like to work with the British Pharmaceutical Students' Association to support young pharmacists and with the National Association of Women Pharmacists, which he hopes will develop into a large organisation that is widely recognised. "Women play a hugely important role within the profession. If we can convince women pharmacists that joining a professional body is worthwhile then I think the rest of the job would be easy," he argues.

In the short term, he has less ambitious plans — to learn to sleep, to spend more time with his family and friends and to enjoy his last few days in the President's flat.

Mr Patel highlights five ingredients that he believes are key to a successful President: ideas; networks; an understanding of government policy and of what members want; and real passion and commitment.

His advice for the next President, who will be elected during the first week of June, is this: "While bearing in mind the big changes that are taking place in the world in terms of technology, politics and economics, concentrate on meeting the professional needs of pharmacists. And be humble, take note of members wishes and create an organisation that will serve the members with humility and respect. The support [from members] will flow from that."

Mr Patel is confident that the future of the profession is bright but believes that an overt demonstration of commitment, enthusiasm and imagination is needed. "I believe that we are entering a golden phase where our skills, knowledge and position within communities will be appreciated," he says. The big challenge is for all pharmacy organisations to work together and focus on helping pharmacists to deliver a wider range of services at a higher standard than today, he adds.

Mr Patel's swansong will be at the Society's annual general meeting next week, where he plans to present a new award to a pharmacist who he considers has made a significant contribution to serving fellow pharmacists. He intends the award, donated by himself, to be presented by the Society's President on an annual basis thereafter. The Hemant Patel award? He laughs at the suggestion — perhaps that would not fit with the humble approach that he advocates.