

# Is the Society Government's business?

Following the publication last week of the Carter report on professional regulation and leadership in pharmacy and Lord Hunt's view of the future options, **Mike Thompson** records the opinions of some members of the profession on the future of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society

Questions are beginning to be asked about Government plans to replace the Royal Pharmaceutical Society with a General Pharmaceutical Council and what is being termed "a body akin to a royal college" (BARC). Some members of the profession are worried by statements by Lord Hunt that the BARC will be "a new body" and that the Society is incapable of evolving into it.

Apparent conflict between these views and the impression given first in the White Paper "Trust, assurance and safety" that the profession would be allowed to decide for itself what form its future leadership body should take, is leading them to call on the Government to declare its hand.

Nick Wood, President of the Society in 1993–94 and again in 2004–05 after the Save Our Society campaign to enshrine professional representation in the 2004 Royal Charter, said that Lord Hunt's statement that a future pharmacy royal college will be a new body was "an intervention too far".

"The Society worked very hard to get its new Royal Charter predicated on the dual role, albeit with greater separation, and now we've got further intervention," he said. "The Society has been appallingly treated by being told it has to split and if we are now being told there has to be a new body then there has been a breach of faith."

Expressing concern for the likely cost of creating a royal college, Mr Wood said: "It's going to cost the Society and its members a lot of money. We're doing all this to address the regulatory agenda so the public should put money in with no strings attached to make the royal college the puppet of the chief pharmacists."

Despite the fact that the past two and a half years have seen a Department of Health review of regulation, consultation on its report, publication of the White Paper and a working party report on implementation, Mr Wood cannot tell exactly what the DoH intends. "They must have some sort of vision of what sort of body they want," he said.

But Mr Wood is not opposed to the overall direction of travel set out in the Carter report and suggested that the Society and the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland could get together and metamorphose into a royal pharmaceutical college.

"The existing Charter will not need a lot of change to metamorphose into a royal college," he said. "The Carter report is a way forward. A new body does not have to mean dissolution or abolition of those two societies."

Mr Wood is not alone in wondering what the Government wants from any future royal college.

Ian Simpson, chief executive of the College of Pharmacy Practice, said: "Lord Hunt has to explain what he means by 'a new body' and what sort of organisation fulfils his criteria for being a new body. Does the Society combining with others fulfil those criteria?"

He sees difficulties arising from the current position of the Society as a chartered body and the plan for a future royal college. "If it's a new body it will be some time before it gets a royal charter and to be granted the title 'Royal' it will have to be a sufficiently representative body. That has to be earned."

Mr Simpson is clear that mergers between the Society and other organisations is the right way forward. "The Society already has a charter and the title," he said. There is also concern that the charitable status of the CPP might constrain any association or merger with another body.

Despite this, the CPP has welcomed Lord Carter's recommendations that any future royal college should be an inclusive organisation and for it to recognise specialist and advanced practice. "We are particularly interested in the recommendation that the royal college should create an academy of pharmacy practice, and we are consulting our members on this proposal."

## Pay up if it's policy

Mr Simpson agrees with Mr Wood that the DoH must put its hand in its pocket and not expect the profession to pay for all the changes it wants.

"The Government should fund the setting up of the General Pharmaceutical Council," he said. "And if it's Government policy set out in a White Paper that there should be a royal college, then the Government should contribute at least the start-up cost."

Others, however, believe that the Society is too remote from its members and too focused on regulation to be anything more than one of many voices that contribute to developing a BARC.

Andrew White, chairman of the Society's Bolton branch, said: "The Society should be a key facilitator, but not the only voice or the one that decides."

Drawing a parallel with the low turnout for Society Council elections, he asked: "How many will engage with the Society?"

He also believes that building a BARC round the non-regulatory functions of the Society risks not addressing past leadership failures. "I have to ask what would be left of the Society after regulation has been removed. We must be sure that we're genuinely creating a vision and then fitting bodies into it, rather than fitting the vision to the bodies."

He added: "I'm proud of the Society, but there are people who will not come into the tent if it's the same old thing."

Urging people to leave their egos behind, Mr White said: "We must work out what is most important for pharmacists and for the profession and look at the infrastructure afterwards."

But he believes that a faculty structure for the new body is right. "The faculty idea is good. It has to be inclusive. If people find it to be exclusive then they will hive themselves off to factions, as in the past. We can not allow this to happen, we must have a united pharmacy voice in the future."

Duncan McRobbie, a past chairman of the United Kingdom Clinical Pharmacy Association, agrees that the Society has to address factionalism arising from a lack of engagement with specialist groups.

"I would suggest that for many of them the Society is seen as the regulator, and that their professional interests are supported by their individual organisations," he said. "The challenge by Lord Carter is that the Society will need to engage these organisations and convince their members that it will be able to change sufficiently to meet the professional needs of this diversity if it is to be a cornerstone of a new royal college."

He added that the Society needed to think altruistically, rather than about self-preservation and recognising that it might have to become a totally different body to meet the needs of the profession.

"Failure to do so will result in not only the loss of the Society but also the loss of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to bring the profession together."

## What has the Government spent on other professions?

Pharmacist MP Sandra Gidley has been asking questions in Parliament designed to find out how much money the Government has spent to support regulatory changes in other health professions.

So far, she has been told that £1.5m was given to the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges to support the development of revalidation processes for specialist recertification; £3.66m was given to the Nursing and Midwifery Council; and £3.8m was given to the Health Professions Council.

When asked how much money would be spent on pharmacy, health minister Andy Burnham went no further than to say that the Government "has no desire to see the development of either the General Pharmaceutical Council or the proposed royal college in a manner which is unsustainable."