

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Modernising the regulatory function does not mean neglecting members' interests

The Royal Pharmaceutical Society is undergoing a process of improving and modernising its regulatory functions to meet future Government and public expectation, which will be monitored through the scrutiny of the proposed Council for the Regulation of Healthcare Professionals. But that does not mean that the Society will turn away from supporting the profession and representing its members' interests and concerns, says Marshall Davies

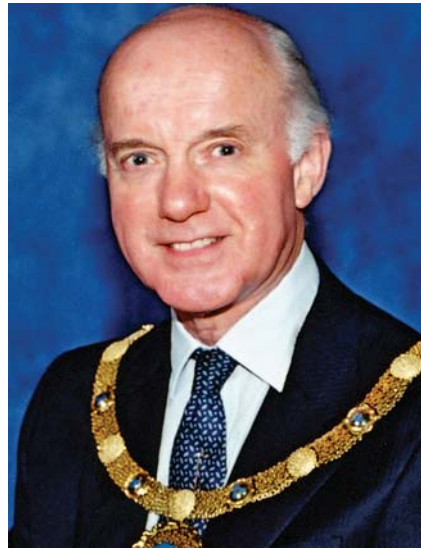
The NHS Reform and Health Care Professions Bill is making its way through the House of Lords. For health professions, the key change that it brings is the introduction of a new regulatory council to monitor the performance of all health professional regulatory bodies and, where they are found wanting, to make sure that improvements are made so that regulation works in the public interest. This new council will have powers to direct regulatory bodies to make changes to the way that they work. In the original Bill, these powers were drawn very widely — that is to say, there appeared to be few limits as to the circumstances in which they could be used.

The Society was concerned that these powers could be used in such a way as to impair our effectiveness as a regulator or to subject health professional regulation to undue political interference. Along with the other regulatory bodies, the Society successfully lobbied for the new Council's powers of direction to be restricted to circumstances where both Houses of Parliament agree that they need to be deployed (*PJ*, 9 March, p313). We are gratified that the Government has responded to our concerns and has made Parliament, rather than ministers or Department of Health civil servants, the arbiter of whether an individual regulator should be directed to change its ways of operating.

PERFORMANCE COMPARISON

A major role for the new council will be to compare performance between health professional regulators to ensure that they all are working as effectively as possible and, importantly, can be seen to be doing so. We welcome this new emphasis on the principle of accountability, which is right and proper where public safety is an issue. However, it does mean that, like all the health professional regulatory bodies, the Society is having to consider its remit, functions and ways of working and make changes where necessary (*PJ*, 2 March, p226).

Change usually means uncertainty and upheaval and, certainly, no one wants change for change's sake. But, although change is now a necessity, there are some pharmacists who seem not to appreciate why we need to engage in and invest in this crucial process of reform. The alternative to getting involved is, in my view, deeply unpalatable. Like other health professions,



The President: debate must be based on an understanding of what is actual and possible

we believe that professional influence in professional regulation serves the public well. We value the ability to shape and manage the policies and processes that underpin pharmacists' education and practice at every stage of their working lives. Now, this is a privilege that we must earn. The Government has given explicit signals about what it expects from regulatory bodies in terms of checks and balances, accountability and transparency. If we ignore those signals, there can be no doubt that the profession will lose its influence and involvement in the regulation of pharmacists, which will then be managed by other means.

To promote understanding of these issues within the profession and beyond, we have embarked on a communications programme of talks and meetings across the Society's network and with other groups inside and outside pharmacy. We believe that it is important that pharmacists, patients and other stakeholders have the opportunity to discuss the nature of modern professionalism and to contribute to our programme to identify and implement reform.

BASIS FOR DEBATE

The work in progress has stimulated much debate and it is heartening that pharmacists feel so strongly and positively about the future of the Society and their profession. However, it is important that debate is based

on an understanding of what is actual and possible.

Some concern has been expressed that, in improving and modernising its regulatory functions, the Society is proposing to turn away from its members' interests. At one extreme, this appears to be founded on a view that the Society should be a trade union that negotiates pay and conditions for pharmacists in the same way as do the British Medical Association for doctors and the Royal College of Nursing for nurses. This appears to be a particular issue among employee and locum pharmacists, some of whom evidently feel the lack of a national body to represent their particular interests and concerns.

Although it would clearly be impossible for a regulatory body to undertake the kinds of representative functions undertaken by a trade union, the Society's role does allow it to act as an advocate for the profession. Where there is an issue of public policy that impacts on the profession of pharmacy, the Society makes representations and has developed a credible and effective voice for the profession with government and the health organisations in the three home countries.

In addition, the Society undertakes many other activities that support the profession. Membership of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society is a licence to practise, by virtue of being a kitemark of quality for the public. Of course, the public is not necessarily aware of the myriad activities and processes that combine to create the modern definition of "regulation": education, registration, training, continuing professional development and revalidation, as well as dealing with misconduct and poor performance.

PUBLIC SCRUTINY

In the past, the scrutiny of health professional regulators' ways of working has tended to be only on an ad hoc basis — and usually after things have gone wrong. Now, the new council will act as the public's proxy, exercising continual scrutiny of and seeking clarity across the full range of our regulatory activities.

It is our task to put in place sound policies to underpin these important functions and to manage their implementation and continued improvement so that everything we do matches up to expectation — and measurably so.