

Future membership of the Society must bring recognisable benefits

By Mike Price

Am I a pharmacist? This is a question I ask myself often, especially when my retention fee invoice arrives each year, the demanded figure seeming to be following exponential mathematics.

Well, I started out in the normal way, three years of undergraduate study in a quality regional university, acquiring a good grounding in the primary disciplines. Following that, I honed my skills in a branch of a well-known pharmacy multiple. Then followed several years of what most understand of pharmacy and the role of the pharmacist, expertise in the counting triangle and an in depth knowledge of "How to play the Drug Tariff and win!". However, one day opportunity knocked and I became an "industrial pharmacist" — I got to work at the mill, rather than down at the store.

And the mill, it wanted a pharmacist — why? Simply because the department (international medical affairs) did not have one and believed that having one might add a new perspective. Until then, the department was a fine body of accomplished biomedical scientists with the odd physician thrown in. None of them had studied pharmaceutics (though quite a few had studied some pharmacology). So, was I a pharmacist? I no longer wielded a counting triangle, no longer did I have to nod when the Pavlovian paracetamol bell rang. I was suddenly an administrator, a manager of scientists, had an obscure job title, but could I still call myself a pharmacist when a single-word job descriptor was required for a form? I guess I was thought, because my colleagues consulted me on an almost daily basis about matters pharmaceutical.

The situation got no better as the years passed, and I now find myself working as a freelance consultant, performing such diverse roles as regulatory affairs, medical affairs, training and communications. I guess my original training and experience gives me an edge over colleagues and competitors, but there are many non-pharmacists out there doing identical work, probably as well, if not better. So, am I a pharmacist? Should I write that big cheque each year? After all if I did not I could still

read *The Pharmaceutical Journal* online and would never suffer the indignity of coming before the Statutory Committee for jay walking in women's clothes! And I would save a bundle into the bargain.

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So, I have started to convince myself I am no longer a pharmacist. I could afford an extra couple of long weekends, and I would free an extra 30 hours to enjoy them. The certificate? Well it is up here on my study wall. But I am sure I can find one of those green weeping Spanish ladies to take its place. Or perhaps I should hang something

by that great fan of our seemingly unrestricted title Damian Hurst? But there is something that stops me: a little voice, and it says, "Don't do it Mike. You know you loved that white coat, you loved those carboys filled with pretty coloured water, and making dithranol pastes on a cold winter's day." The voice wins, I write the cheque and post it, the *PJ* continues to arrive, and Damian does not make a sale.

I imagine that up and down the country there are many other members who have a similar dilemma, suffering this inner turmoil, searching for the meaning of "pharmacist". Like me, they fulfilled an ambition when they got their certificate. Now they were the recognised experts in the field of medicines. They, too, grafted for several years at "the sharp end", but their careers now take them in different directions where they do similar (professional) work to non-pharmacists, but where the work is still in some ways related to their former experience and pharmaceutical expertise. I wonder if they pause to think each January? How many of them do we lose to the waste-paper basket? Will even more fall by the wayside in the coming years?

What may have prompted this soul-searching are the changes the profession is now going through. Normally I love change — life is so short, change results in diversity,

new experiences and, hopefully, improvement. It is somewhat ironic that I am writing this just a few miles from the epicentre of the driver of many current changes, the Bristol Royal Infirmary. If it was not for all these changes (and the consequent sharp increase in retention fees), I guess I would have happily just gone on paying, not really questioning the validity of my status as a pharmacist.

We have to change; I accept that. We have to modernise; I welcome that. If I am typical of a growing breed of pharmacists not working in conventional practice, and the profession as a whole wishes us to remain as part of this large family, then the changes must reflect the diversity of pharmacists' roles. I think we should continue to be accepted as pharmacists and that whatever definition of pharmacist exists should be broadly inclusive so as to encompass us. The profession may be stronger as a result of embracing such diversity, benefiting from the broader base of experience, skills and perspectives. If I am to remain on the register, together with those who are like-minded, there needs to be recognition and

acceptance of our obvious differences, and continued membership must bring us recognisable benefits.

For now, the little voice has won; my name stays for now. I now cast my mind to appropriate ways of meeting my continuing professional development obligations because the pharmacy postgraduate education provided falls short of my rather odd areas of "practice". I no longer work at the mill. The mills are closing — "consolidation" they call it. Soon I will not be allowed to work in the store if I should so wish (at least without some retraining). I am the

peripatetic jobbing man, still proud of once mastering his trade. I remain at heart a pharmacist; in soul, doubtful.

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