

Why wreck the Society just to satisfy a “one size fits all” regulatory policy?

By Robert Blyth, FRPharmS, editor of *The Pharmaceutical Journal* from 1961 to 1986

In the centre, at the heart, of the letter from the chief pharmacist for England, Jim Smith (*PJ*, 19 June, p777), comes the bullet intended to dispose of the idea of a regulatory board within the Royal Pharmaceutical Society. We are told that such a board, because of the miscellaneous functions for which it would be responsible, would lead to confusion about which part of the Society had authority over professional regulation. As Dr Smith writes: “This would fail the test of transparency since the outside world would not be able to see where responsibility lay.”

Dr Smith ignores the destruction of the Society as the representative body of pharmacists, should his ideas be accepted. As I have been allowed to say in these columns before, it is the members of a profession, not laymen, who advance the contribution of their profession to the wellbeing of the public they serve. The expression “the public interest” is a favourite with some politicians, despite it being an indefinable term. The Society’s current Royal Charter requires attention to the interests of members of the Society, with the important qualification “in their exercise of the profession of pharmacy”. Let me repeat that it is the members of any profession, not laymen, whose duty, propensity and ability it is to move forward and develop that profession in the service of the public. The Society has been the pharmacists’ tent, their meeting place and has encouraged their sense of unity: a successful and very British invention. Let us remember that the Society’s code of ethics had its origins in a motion from Teesside branch that came before the branch representatives’ meeting in July 1937.

Dr Smith also writes: “If the regulatory board was subordinate to a Council that continued to have a professional majority of 87 per cent as now, that would mean that the RPSGB had not complied with the requirements of the NHS Plan.” No one is proposing that a regulatory board would be subordinate to the Society’s Council. The Society’s Statutory Committee, surely a regulatory body, has always been independent of the Council, and has jealously defended that independence. I will come later to an incident which illus-

trates that point. Naturally, the Council has not always been in complete agreement with the way in which the Committee has discharged its functions, but that does not affect the value placed upon it and the respect in which it is held. As Sir Hugh Linstead (a former distinguished secretary and registrar of the Society) wrote in 1983 on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the granting of Royal Assent to the Pharmacy and Poisons Act of 1933: “I would regard the creation and operation of the Statutory Committee as the most important outcome of the 1933 Act in the long term interests of the pharmacist.”

The value of the Statutory Committee in terms of serving the public interest was underlined in 1981 subsequent to the passing, by 10 votes to nine, by the Society’s Council of a resolution that the reporting of Statutory Committee proceedings in *The Pharmaceutical Journal* was excessive and repetitive. The proposer of the motion described the reports as the worst possible advertisement for the profession. The seconder added that he had looked at the journals of seven other profes-

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sions which had disciplinary bodies, and not one of them reported cases in full as did *The Pharmaceutical Journal*. The proposer of the motion indicated that there was no intention of attempting to introduce control over the editor. Quoting that remark, a *PJ* leading article (31 October 1981, p504) concluded that the Council was merely dissociating itself from the reports. In the issue with the leading article was also a letter from a sociologist (p507), which is relevant to Dr Smith’s demand for transparency in relation to “the outside world”. The letter was from Robert Dingwall, husband of a pharmacist, and a senior research officer at the Social Science Research Council Centre for Socio-Legal Studies, Wolfson College, Oxford. In his letter, he refuted the charge that the reports were “the worst possible advertisement for the profession”, arguing that, in fact, the coverage provided represented an excellent advertisement for the profession and a model which others might profitably copy.

The Journal’s reports, he said, constituted a regular reminder of the importance of good

practice, and a rather important part of maintaining the quality of public service in a fragmented and geographically dispersed profession. As such, it might well provide a model from which others could learn and an excellent advertisement for the seriousness with which the profession treated its “contract” with society.

Of course, the Statutory Committee, like any other body, is not infallible, and should be open to criticism, which brings me to the incident to which I referred earlier. In a *PJ* leader, I, as editor, criticised the Statutory Committee. The late Charles Drummond, who was a member of the committee for 25 years, from 1959 to 1984, threatened to resign because he regarded such criticism from the official journal as interference with the independence of the committee. The late F. W. Adams, the then secretary and registrar of the Society, travelled to Edinburgh to try to dissuade Mr Drummond from his intended course of action, in which attempt Mr Adams happily succeeded.

It is relevant to add that, following Charles Drummond’s death in 1984, the then chairman of the Statutory Committee (Sir Carl Aarvold) in a valediction mentioned the incident, saying that Charles Drummond had held the independence of the Statutory Committee most sincerely, to the extent of offering his resignation when he felt it was being endangered (*PJ*, 22 February 1986, p240).

Dr Smith claims that “we (it is not clear who “we” are) see no coherent way in which [the regulatory functions of the Society] could be exercised other than under the authority of the Council”. As I hope I have demonstrated, the regulatory function performed by the Society’s Statutory Committee has never been in any way subordinate, to use Dr Smith’s word, to the Society’s Council. Indeed, the Society’s record in that connection is exemplary. The idea that separation of well-defined functions would cause confusion, as Dr Smith alleges, is, as Jacob Bell, the founder of the Society in 1841, might have said, in the parlance of the time: “the peck of the fancy”. And do not let us forget that Jacob Bell also founded *The Pharmaceutical Journal*, which has played such a significant part in moulding the profession as we know it today.

Dr Smith, as a pharmacist, will know something of the Society’s distinguished record. Why wreck such an organisation that has stood the test of time, just to satisfy a “one size fits all” policy?