

# Pharmacists are our own best PR

By Graham Phillips, member of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's Council

In last week's **Broad spectrum** article (*PJ*, 30 September, p390), Sandra Gidley MP rightly pointed out that now, more than ever, pharmacy must be out there ensuring that politicians understand our role and back our cause. Mrs Gidley is right when she says that pharmacy organisations should put more resource and effort into engaging effectively with politicians of all parties.

Of course we should. I have long argued that the pharmacy bodies should work together to maximise our effectiveness and create a more visible presence for the profession. I believe that the Royal Pharmaceutical Society should invest far more in activities that support and give a voice to the profession. As a member of its Council, I strive to achieve that balance.

However, as chairman of the Society's public affairs planning group, I cannot leave the membership with the impression that the Society is ignoring the importance of public affairs. On the contrary, the Society invests considerable resources in a public affairs programme that has measurably succeeded in raising the profession's profile. The effectiveness of this work has been acknowledged by senior political figures in England, Scotland and Wales with a health brief from all the main political parties.

Yes, a good working relationship with ministers and officials is crucial but that does not stop us making a robust case on issues where we do not agree with Government. In fact, I challenged Lord Warner (the "NHS-modernisation minister") publicly on his support for pharmacy at the Labour conference, which I attended as a representative of the Society last week. More on this anon.

We must take our message to all the political parties, think tanks and patient groups wherever the Society has a remit.

Devolution of health policy to Scotland and Wales has required additional effort. The Society's executives in those countries have developed close, effective relationships with the devolved administrations. Given the influence of the EU in framing legislation, we are also active in lobbying on directives and other measures that originate there.

Our overall aim is to get pharmacy into the strategic debate and involved in decision-making and to position the Society as a "must-consult" organisation. Pharmacy is embedded in many aspects of health policy in England, Scotland and Wales. However, we all know that pharmacy still regularly gets overlooked and ignored. This is partly because politicians and the media tend to default to

the simplistic notion that "health" equals "doctors and nurses". That rubs off on the public too and we need to find more effective ways to address this.

When I talk to pharmacy audiences, I am often asked what the national pharmacy bodies are doing about a particular or contentious political issue. My reply is often "Tell me what you are doing about it". We have one massive advantage that we must make more of: 12,000 pharmacies that could and should function as a living portal for the pharmacy message. Every time a member of the public goes into a pharmacy — millions of "hits" a day — we have the opportunity to make a good impression, communicate a message and demonstrate why we matter to an audience of more members of the public, patients, carers, politicians and journalists than the pharmacy bodies can ever hope to reach. Pharmacies and pharmacists are our own best PR.

Successful public affairs work is built upon sustained day-to-day contacts and briefings across all the political parties punctuated by "big bang" campaigns. In Westminster, we have been briefing this year on a range of important issues: pharmacy education and the academic workforce; the pharmacy workforce and skillmix; pharmacist access to patient information and IT; prescribing and medicines management; and primary care. In Scotland and Wales, we have tackled issues specific to the parliament or assembly programmes, such as prescription charges and practice developments relating to the new contracts, and are preparing briefings ahead of forthcoming elections.

This year, we undertook a major briefing programme on the Health Act. We briefed a wide range of MPs and peers of all parties who, as a result, raised our concerns in both houses. We distributed a well-received and influential briefing on hospital pharmacy for England. We were active in drawing attention to the damage caused by the oxygen supply fiasco, meeting the health departments in England and Wales and giving full briefings to both Opposition parties in Westminster and to all Welsh Assembly members.

Because it is so important to engage with all political parties, the Society fosters good dialogue with the front bench health teams in England, Scotland and Wales and with a broad range of opinion formers with health, social care, science or industry interests.

Success in public affairs is also about partnership working and the Society and the other pharmacy bodies undertake many ac-

tivities together. Chief among these is our support for the All-Party Pharmacy Group at Westminster, a highly active parliamentary group with over 100 MPs and peers in membership. Under the leadership of its chairman, Howard Stoate MP, and its officers, currently Mark Todd MP, Sandra Gidley MP, Baroness Cumberlege and Baroness Tonge, the group has tackled some key issues affecting pharmacy and produced thoughtful reports on topics including the pharmacy and general medical services contracts, control of entry, IT, emergency hormonal contraception and primary care. The group is now undertaking an inquiry into the future of pharmacy and members can respond through its website ([www.appg.org.uk](http://www.appg.org.uk)).

The strength of the pharmacy organisations working together from their different perspectives was demonstrated beyond doubt when the Office of Fair Trading proposed a free-for-all market in community pharmacy. The organisations — and, most importantly, pharmacists themselves — mounted a vigorous lobby to communicate concerns to the public, who swamped politicians' mailboxes with letters of support for our position. In turn, politicians across all parties backed pharmacy's cause — a highly unusual result, politically speaking. Scotland and Wales rejected the OFT's plans. In England, the Government backed away from the OFT's position with its so-called "balanced package of measures", the effects of which we continue to monitor.

The pharmacy bodies also work together on other public affairs activities. We organise meetings where health spokespeople of all parties can discuss their policies with pharmacists and patient groups. At the party conferences in England, Scotland and Wales, we have run award-winning exhibition stands and organised groups of pharmacists to highlight issues in fringe meetings. This year, the Society has attended the party conferences in England and Scotland. Most recently, members will have read about the Society's work at the recent Labour conference, where we were active in fringe meetings and engaged in dialogue with three health ministers and several MPs.

All in all, we are undertaking an ambitious and energetic programme, getting maximum value from the allocated resources. There are lots of successes to report but there is so much more to do to put pharmacy at the centre of the debate. I have gone on record as saying that pharmacy, and the Society in particular, needs to shout more about the excellent work done on the profession's behalf. I want members — including Sandra Gidley, the only MP who is a pharmacist — to keep challenging us to get our message across more effectively. The profession and the public we serve deserve no less.

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