

Evolution, not revolution, within our professional body is the way forward

By Nicola Gray, of Manchester, former member of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's Council

I realise that I am possibly one of a small minority who is genuinely saddened by the Government's decision to separate the regulatory and professional leadership functions within pharmacy. I have always seen the dual role as a great strength. I have always believed that our interests and the public interest are firmly aligned: to do anything against the public interest would be counter-intuitive for a profession whose majority depend upon unfettered customer loyalty to survive and prosper. I must, however, concentrate my energies on thinking ahead as the Government and many other pharmacists do not share my views. What gives me greater cause for concern is the apparent haste with which so many have taken the Government at its word to jump on the idea of creating a new royal college-type body.

The White Paper actually says that pharmacy needs a "learned and authoritative organisation, supporting professionalism, excellence and innovation in the science and practice of pharmacy." This is a huge agenda, yet the Government seemingly fails to acknowledge that the Royal Pharmaceutical Society already fulfils such functions. The Government, ironically, now has only an influencing role over our professional leadership body's future. It is truly our decision to make.

We should think carefully before we discard 160 years of stormy, yet ultimately proud and credible, pharmacy heritage. The massive corporate memory within the Society of education, practice, science and health policy cannot be immediately recreated in any royal college-type body. Trusting relationships with other professional bodies that have taken years to create can take minutes to destroy. Why would we throw our Society away? Surely it would simplify some of our angst about assets and direction if we commit to evolution, not revolution?

I recognise that many members have not been privy to the internal workings of the Society. I have been privileged and honoured to serve as a branch chairman, regional secretary and Council member, in which role I chaired the Science Committee for several years and championed the branch network. My first link to the Society was as a representative of the British Pharmaceutical Students' Association, and we have seen again only recently how future pharmacists form an integral part of the Society (*PJ*, 21 April, p470). I

have successfully nominated a colleague for fellowship of the Society, and I have seen many distinguished non-pharmacists delight in their honorary memberships and fellowships, including June Crown and the Princess Royal. There is much good to see, yet members still feel remote and that must change.

In recent correspondence, I have been disheartened to see divisions forming yet again over how to move forward to improve our professional leadership voice. We have only just welcomed technicians into our professional family, and yet we see all too soon those who would eject them again, at a time when skill mix and co-operative working are necessary for the pharmacy family to make the

most of the opportunities and challenges in day-to-day practice in all sectors. Pharmaceutical scientists who are not pharmacists also offer much to the profession in supporting leading-edge technology and reminding us of our scientific roots for practice.

I reviewed the past few weeks' *PJ* correspondence and articles on this matter and I think that Sandra Gidley (*PJ*, 31 March, p364) and Ian Caldwell (*ibid*, p366), in particular, shared great good sense. Sandra Gidley urged us to accept the Society structure as the basis for moving forward and Ian Caldwell explored the impact of the new non-regulatory world on its organisational and financial structure.

I have no doubt that many pharmacists see a royal college-type body as a short cut to greater respect from other health care professionals. There is no shortcut. There is no substitute for long-standing personal relationships and mutual responsibility for patient care leading to mutual respect.

Although I think there are good reasons for bringing educational organisations together to create such a body, the only way that it would truly work would involve more expense for pharmacists, both in examination and membership fees and in time taken to achieve qualifications that I suspect the majority would not cope with at this point. Any less, however, would not achieve parity with other colleges and would undermine this aspiration.

Other pharmacists see it as a trade union, like the Royal College of Nursing. Well, that could evolve within any body, including the Society of the future. I might lean towards the British Medical Association as a model of that

type, with strong professional leadership and a fine pedigree of publications and policy statements.

There is competition in the market for the new Society, which most would feel is healthy. The mooted merger between the National Pharmacy Association and the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee could give community pharmacy a stronger voice. The "Waterloo group" could be a haven for members of special interest groups and those who wish to pursue higher academic recognition. There is no reason why we should expect one body to pursue our many and diverse objectives. The challenge, as always, is to work together with a strong voice.

One of the most important developments of the past few years was to create the national boards for pharmacy. I believe that these fledgling structures will provide members with the connection and relevance that they feel has been lacking from the Society as a pan-GB body. We finally have the structure to recognise the rate and direction of change of practice in different home countries. Had this decision been taken several years ago, or had the Foster process happened some years hence, this present discussion might have been very different.

I believe firmly that the Royal Pharmaceutical Society is still the best structure within which to bring pharmacists, pharmacy technicians and pharmaceutical scientists together. As Sandra Gidley and Ian Caldwell said, it must refocus and raise its game, considering a sustainable but modest membership fee. The majority of our Charter objectives can be pursued with vigour: there should be no question of revoking the Charter.

It has become clear to me that this is a turbulent time for pharmacy, a high-risk era where we launch into new roles while everything that has historically underpinned us seems to shift like sand. Everything from the community pharmacy wholesaling system to previously entrenched professional roles seems to be in flux. We could rise very high, and we could fall very hard. Evolution, not revolution, within our professional body is my preferred way forward.

We have a great opportunity. Whereas Ann Lewis had the supremely difficult job of keeping the organisation's heart and soul together under a series of challenging administrations, her successor will have the opportunity to refocus in a more unfettered world.

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