

Why including lay members makes professional bodies more influential

By Michael Schofield, a former lay member of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's Council

Pharmacy is on the brink of momentous change. The creation of a new body which is unequivocally representative of the profession's interests, unencumbered by regulatory matters, will give new opportunities to influence the Government, the regulatory body, the public and other professions. It is particularly advantageous that this initiative comes at a time when the government and the public are supportive of developing the role of the pharmacist and widening the scope of professional work.

The profession will decide

It is, of course, for the profession to decide what sort of body should emerge, phoenix-like, from the ashes of several others. While the Royal Pharmaceutical Society is affected and involved to a greater degree than any other body, the new organisation needs to start with a clean sheet and be greater than the sum of its constituent parts. This is a wonderful opportunity to learn from the past and to shape the future, and it will not occur again for decades. The Transitional Committee has a particularly important role to play in clarifying the issues and options and determining the best way forward.

One of the fundamental issues is whether to seek chartered status and be accountable to the Privy Council. This would entail, among other obligations, the need to have some lay involvement in the work of the new body.

It is unsurprising that there are some who would prefer not to go along this road and see this as an opportunity to create a body consisting entirely of pharmacists, with an accountability only to fellow pharmacist members. This has the merit of simplicity and is, clearly, a new departure.

There is, however, a cautionary and contrary viewpoint which needs to be taken into account as discussions continue about the constitution of the new organisation. There is really only one test of success in this whole enterprise, which is what will best contribute to the effectiveness of the new body.

The role of lay members on a professional body can be compared to that of non-executive directors on a company board. There are two core purposes. First there is a duty to ensure that there is a strategic vision for the organisation which takes account of relevant external factors. Secondly there is a duty to ensure proper governance of the organisation and that the seven Nolan principles are observed by the board collectively and by its individual members. These principles would be relevant in the following ways:

- **Selflessness** — decisions should be taken in terms of the public interest and not in order to gain financial or other material benefits for self, family or friends
- **Integrity** — board members should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organisations that might influence them in the performance of their duties
- **Objectivity** — in carrying out business, including making appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals for awards or benefits, choices should be made on merit
- **Accountability** — board members are accountable for their decisions and actions and must submit themselves to whatever scrutiny is appropriate
- **Openness** — board members should be as open as possible about all the decisions and actions they take. They should give reasons for their decisions and restrict information only when the wider public interest clearly demands this
- **Honesty** — board members have a duty to declare any private interests relating to their duties and to take steps to resolve any conflicts arising in a way that protects the public interest
- **Leadership** — board members should promote and support these principles by leadership and example

A board without non-executive directors or lay members can, of course, be capable of having regard to these duties. It is nevertheless considered, both in public and commercial life, that the presence of non-executive directors or lay members gives assurance to shareholders or members and to the outside world. A professional body representing pharmacists would surely wish to have regard to the way its credibility is perceived externally.

With regard to the possible link to the Privy Council via chartered status, in the past it has been generally advantageous to have this status. This has emphasised the importance of its role and given access to government, which has been valuable.

The lay members have been appointed after a rigorous process in which the profession has had some input and have brought a wide range of skills and external networks to the work of a professional body. These could, in the future, include financial management and marketing, which will be very important to the new organisation. Other important skills and networks could include the professional/public interface, for example, through

experience of the world of patient interest groups and voluntary organisations. An important area will be corporate governance, which has been difficult in the past few years and may not become easier. These skill areas are only illustrative examples and the pharmacy profession will be best able to assess the kinds of skills which are needed. The term "lay" is used simply to describe anyone who is not a registered pharmacist and there is a wide range of options. Through their training and work many pharmacists possess these skills but interaction with non-pharmacist expertise can still be beneficial to a governing body.

If it is decided that there should be a lay input, an important issue both symbolically and practically is what should be the proportionate level of this input. When I joined the Society's Council nearly 10 years ago there were three lay members on a Council of 24. This was just about sufficient to enable an effective contribution to be made. In terms of the way the new professional body is seen by its pharmacist members it might be advisable, if a lay input is considered advantageous, for it to be a minority one.

The new representative body will be seeking to be influential — with the profession, the Government, the public and, in practical terms, most importantly with the General Pharmaceutical Council. Involvement of credible lay members will help in developing the organisation's influence, which is the acid test of whether it will prosper.

Chartered status is valuable

The issues around chartered status and lay membership can be considered separately and it might be helpful for this approach to be adopted. I think that chartered status is really rather valuable and that it should not lightly be abandoned. However it must be recognised that this is a possibility, either because the Privy Council no longer considers it appropriate or because the new professional body does not want it.

Even if this were to happen, the question of lay membership would not necessarily be resolved. It could still be advisable for the new professional body to recognise the value of lay input and to incorporate this into the constitution. It would then be even better presented as the wish of the profession rather than an external imposition and the new professional body would be demonstrating, from the beginning, a recognition of its public as well as its professional accountability and a recognition also of the importance of the principles of good governance.