

# LISTENING FRIENDS CAN HELP

**The Listening Friends scheme is set up to support pharmacists, preregistration trainees and even pharmacy students in practicals who are dealing with work related stress. Alan Nathan describes the Listening Friends scheme, how it works and what it can offer**

Alan Nathan is chairman of the Listening Friends scheme

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**A**s chairman of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's Listening Friends scheme, I am certainly well aware of the problem of stress. The scheme was set up nearly 11 years ago to help pharmacists who were affected by stress.

In the past 11 years stress factors in pharmacy have certainly increased. From conversations I have had with pharmacists, and cases dealt with by the scheme, it appears the new NHS community pharmacy contracts are proving to be a source of increased pressure, as profits on dispensing have been reduced and funding has been redirected to clinical services that many contractors are finding difficult to provide. The contracts have also introduced new clinical governance requirements and the amount of record keeping, form filling and dealing with bureaucracy, leaving less time available for pharmacists to fulfil their professional functions.

Employees of multiples complain of being pressured by their companies to take on additional roles without an increase in either staff resources or pay. In hospital and primary care pharmacy, recent NHS financial cutbacks have increased workload, and the reorganisation of primary care trusts has left pharmacists employed by them uncertain about their futures.

Another source of stress reported is the perceived more hostile attitude in the past few years of the Society to its members in relation to fitness-to-practise matters. Concerns have also

been expressed about the large increase in numbers of people studying pharmacy as a result of the expansion of intakes of existing schools and the opening of new ones, and the implications for future employment and pay prospects.

## **Support**

Since its inception the Listening Friends scheme has helped around 3,000 pharmacists cope with stress-related issues, although not all of these have been directly related to work. One of the recognised ways of coping with stress is to relieve the burden by talking it through with somebody else, and this is the core principle of the scheme's operation and the basis of its success. Most of the caseload are single calls where the caller wants to get a problem off his or her chest. They then usually feel better able to deal with it themselves and do not feel the need to come back for further support, although it is always available if wanted.

## **Unique advantage**

The unique advantage of Listening Friends is that all its volunteers are pharmacists and therefore have an understanding of the problems being expressed to them, and can genuinely empathise with callers. In addition, they all have initial and ongoing training in listening and counselling skills, and many have additional counselling or therapy qualifications. Callers can feel secure when they contact the service because they call in anonymously to an automated line, giving only a first name

(or a pseudonym if they prefer), a number and a suitable time to call back on. If they have a preference, callers can request to speak to either a male or female Listening Friend. Calls are picked up daily by a co-ordinator (one of a team of four senior pharmacists in the scheme), who then allocates them to LFs. LFs are trained to listen, and to help callers, if they want, towards finding their own solution to their problem. LFs also have a list of resources for further, more specialist help in specific situations, if they think it would be of use.

The Society may not have it within its power to resolve all the issues that cause stress for its members, and some members may even feel that it contributes to them, but it does provide effective help in coping with stress and it is only a telephone call away — on 020 7572 2442. ■

*Preregistration trainees are welcome to use the scheme, as are pharmacy students. However, it should be noted that counsellors are less likely to be able to help with problems that are more associated with being a student, eg, finding money to buy books, although the Listening Friend may be able to refer the student for assistance from the Benevolent Fund in the case of extreme financial hardship, especially towards the end of study. Help for the more student specific problems is best sought from your university's student services department. — Editor*