The Royal Pharmaceutical Society has recently published its “Fitness to practise annual report” for 2008. In this article, Wendy Harris, the Society’s deputy registrar and director of regulation, summarises the report’s contents and explains why it is important.

The publication of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society’s first “Fitness to practise annual report” (PJ, 6 September 2008, p278) was an important landmark in the development of the Society’s new regulatory processes which came into effect in March 2007 under the Pharmacists and Pharmacy Technicians Order.

The second report covers the period 1 April 2008–31 March 2009 and successfully builds on the foundations laid by the first report, while also drawing comparisons with the regulatory activities that took place in the previous year. Over the course of this period there have been a number of exciting developments. The most significant of these is the planned separation of the Society’s regulatory and professional roles and responsibilities and the transfer of regulatory functions in 2010 to the new independent regulatory body, the General Pharmaceutical Council.

There have also been important changes in internal restructuring with the Society’s fitness-to-practise and legal affairs directorate and its education and registration directorate being merged to form a single regulation directorate in July 2008. The regulation directorate’s mission is to protect and maintain patient safety by supporting and enforcing safe and effective standards of practice in pharmacy.

Key events and activities are described in detail within the report with three detailed case studies presented of anonymised actual cases which are illustrative of the types of cases, issues and outcomes heard by the new fitness-to-practise committees over the relevant period.

Key regulatory developments included the following:

- The Council for Healthcare Regulatory Excellence published an annual review in September 2008 of the performance of all nine UK healthcare regulatory bodies concluding that the performance of the Society was “good”.
- The Pharmacy Regulation and Oversight Group was established to oversee and advise Ministers on the setting up of the GPhC.
- The Investigating Committee published its first annual report in April 2008.
- Consolidation and support of the new fitness-to-practise procedures continued through the provision of extensive training to members of all fitness-to-practise committees.

Formal appraisal processes took place for all committee members (and chairmen).

There was a further extension of cases suitable for non-referral to the Investigating Committee under Rule 9 of the Fitness to Practise and Disqualification etc Rules Order of Council 2007.

The first hearing of the interim Disciplinary Committee for pharmacy technicians took place in January 2009.

A pilot project was initiated to gather feedback, and equality and diversity information from all those involved in the Society’s fitness to practise procedures.

The Continuing work of the fitness-to-practise committees is detailed throughout the report, which demonstrates through the provision of key statistics the volume of allegations and cases considered.

The Investigating Committee met on 22 days and considered 1,153 allegations. These concerned 545 individual pharmacists and 45 pharmacy owners. Most allegations considered by the Investigating Committee during the year were “recommendation” cases, which are cases that are considered by the Society to be less likely to be referred to the Disciplinary Committee.

The Health Committee held hearings into 39 allegations involving 39 individual pharmacists. The committee heard 17 applications by the Society to make or renew interim orders to suspend or place conditions on the practice of individual registrants. Eighteen cases in which a registrant’s practice was alleged to be impaired by reason of adverse health were also heard by the committee and four cases were reviewed at review hearings of principal cases.

The Disciplinary Committee heard cases on 102 days in the year from 1 April 2008–31 March 2009. The committee dealt with Statutory Committee inquiries on 70 days and Disciplinary Committee hearings on 32 days during that period.

In addition to the Disciplinary Committee hearing Statutory Committee inquiries, it also dealt with restoration applications or review hearings on 10 days with interim order applications or review hearings on 16 days.

In summary, the production and publication of the “Fitness-to-practise annual report” continues to be a valuable tool in fostering an increased understanding and awareness of the Society’s regulatory functions.