How to help ensure that pharmacy continues to have a voice in Parliament

By Sandra Gidley, pharmacist, and a former officer in Parliament’s All-Party Pharmacy Group

A pparently we have entered a new age of consensus politics but those who are in the know already appreciate that opportunities exist for politicians to work, across party boundaries, where there is a shared agenda.

The best opportunity for cross party working is via the all-party group system. There are hundreds of such groups dealing with almost every subject known to man. Needless to say some groups are more successful than others and one of the best attended, and most successful groups is the All-Party Pharmacy Group.

This group has the moral and financial backing of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, the National Pharmacy Association, the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee and the Company Chemists Association. These bodies fund the secretariat, which is provided by Luther Pendragon, an independent communications consultant. In the last couple of parliaments the group has been chaired by Howard Stoate, a GP who appreciated the potential contribution of pharmacists, and since 2005 I was also an officer of the group.

The group has tried to address topical issues and to develop a more strategic approach to pharmacy policy. Its inquiry into the future of pharmacy helped shape the direction of the pharmacy White Paper and the group has also produced a policy action plan, highlighting what needs to happen in the first 100 days of a new government.

In the past the group has also managed to attract the attention of ministers. Ministers carefully pick and choose which all party groups they will attend and their presence at APPG meetings means that they recognise the importance of pharmacy. Unfortunately the stakeholders have not always made the most of these opportunities to press home the pharmacy agenda. This needs to change if pharmacy is going to be an integral part of the health service.

So much for the past. What about the future?

The more people lobby on any one issue the more likely an individual MP is likely to take it further in Parliament. That is why pharmacists should write to their MPs and ask them to become members of the APPG.

In the next Parliament over a third of the MPs will be newly elected and will take some time to find their feet. Succession planning in Parliament is well nigh impossible because the vagaries of the electorate can never be predicted. Dr Stoate stood down at the recent general election and I was defeated so the APPG now needs to find some new group officers. In practice this means that the staff of Luther Pendragon have been trawling the CVs of new and existing MPs to try to establish a short list of members who may be interested in taking the group forward. This means that CVs will be scrutinised for health interests and potential candidates will be “Googled” to see if they have ever shown interest in visiting a pharmacy to discuss the issues for themselves.

Intriguingly, there may already be an off-the-shelf answer. In the most recent parliament, Mark Simmonds was the Conservative shadow minister for pharmacy and many expected him to step into a similar ministerial role in this Parliament. For some reason this has not happened and many are disappointed since he had made a genuine effort to engage with the full range of pharmacy stakeholders in an attempt to understand the brief. It would get the APPG off to a flying start if he could be persuaded to chair the group in the next Parliament as he already has the ear of health ministers.

Time is short, however, because the many other all-party groups are working through the same processes in a race to secure the brightest and the best as their officers.

In pharmacy there is a particular need to get in early because the APPG was one of the few that produced a plan for the new Parliament. The plan called for the Government to issue guidance so that there was consistency in commissioning pharmacy services and also streamline accreditation arrangements between primary care trusts. There are also many elements of the plan that call for consultation with the various pharmacy stakeholders but pharmacy must not wait for the Government to consult it. The pharmacy bodies should be beating a path to the Government’s door.

This is particularly pertinent because the plan called for the Department of Health to lead a campaign to raise awareness of pharmacy services among key stakeholders — a nice thought. But, given the current financial stringency and reduction in advertising budgets it is highly unlikely that this will happen and the pharmacy organisations need to find a way to fill the void. Another challenge is the Conservative plan to give a lot more power to MPs and there is an urgent need for clarity about how pharmacy fits into this picture.

Let us hope the secretariat will soon identify — and secure — the MPs who will serve as officers of the APPG over the next Parliament. However this is not quite enough: the group needs active members if is to be truly successful in raising pharmacy-related issues in Parliament. This is where pharmacists come in. If members of Parliament want to continue in post, in the long term they need to be tuned into issues of concern to constituents. The more people lobby on any one issue the more likely an individual MP is likely to take it further in Parliament. That is why pharmacists should write to their MPs and ask them to become members of the APPG. This would also be an ideal opportunity for pharmacists to invite their local MPs to their pharmacies to discuss key issues facing the profession.

In an ideal world the all-party groups will continue to operate in they way they have over the past few Parliaments. Unfortunately it is not an ideal world. Now that the media have stopped pecking at the carcass of MPs’ expenses it is an odds-on bet that attention will be diverted to the world of parliamentary lobbying.

Although I know that the past agenda has been set by parliamentary officers rather than funding groups, the press and public may have a different perception. This is why it is vital that the APPG elects officers who are sympathetic to pharmacy but independent of mind. It is also why it is even more vital that the group attracts the active attention of a significant number of MPs. By asking their local MPs to get involved, pharmacists could help ensure this happens.