New Society must be seen to stand up and rock the proverbial boat

Unless the new professional body stands up for community pharmacists, they and locums, who make up the majority of the profession, will look elsewhere for leadership and the Royal Pharmaceutical Society’s existence will be put at risk

Ewan Black Pharmacy superintendent at Stronvar Ltd, Dumbarton

Community pharmacists are sometimes viewed as an apathetic bunch that either choose not to, or cannot be bothered to engage with professional developments.

I would contend that a more accurate picture of community pharmacists is of group trying to do a difficult and responsible job, resigned to the fact that their professional lives are largely controlled by, and for the benefit of, the interests of others.

I have long believed that the majority of the ills afflicting community pharmacy stem from the increasingly profit-driven and competitively commercial environment in which it is forced to operate, and by the resulting disenfranchisement of employed community pharmacists. Although somewhat controversial, these views have found recognition and support from those professional colleagues who, like me, have no vested interests or ulterior motives to disagree with the sentiments.

Any trawl through The Journal’s letters pages will demonstrate that there has been a recent rise in like-minded individuals expressing similar concerns in increasingly strident terms. Matters such as medicines use review targets, rest breaks and medicines shortages are all legitimate issues on which any leader should have an opinion. They impinge on the membership directly, affecting as they do work pressures, professional autonomy and the status of the profession.

Much of the community pharmacy fraternity are obviously looking for help and guidance and they deserve support in addressing these issues from their professional body.

I am sure it is not a coincidence that this increase in crises for help coincides with the separation of the professional body from its regulatory functions. There is a not unreasonable expectation that this new professional body will be able to help, when perhaps its predecessor could not or would not.

I am not naive enough to believe that our new Royal Pharmaceutical Society will be able to cure all of community pharmacy’s ills, or even be able to exert all that much influence. It seldom has in the past. However, it should be trying to, or at least be seen to be trying to. To do so would demonstrate that it understands and empathises with community pharmacists and has an appetite to confront pharmacists’ concerns in a meaningful way. Is this too much to ask?

The President’s workplace pressure campaign was a welcome development, but as is often the case, it has failed to deliver anything tangible. Whether it was ever going to be able to do so, given the disparate and conflicting interests of others associated with pharmacy, is unlikely. However, although the issue has not been resolved, everything has gone quiet. The current silence on this, and on other important issues affecting pharmacy, is likely to be viewed as either a demonstration of our professional body’s impotence to deliver any meaningful change or, just as worryingly, that the Society is more preoccupied by its external relationships and how it is viewed by others than with addressing the needs of its members.

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I know the aversion that exists within the Society to anything that whiffs of trade unionism, and that the Society cannot represent individual pharmacists. However I would contend that nothing that impacts on the profession’s status, and its ability to help patients, should be considered off limits. The professional body should be able to voice a strong opinion on any matter it deems appropriate whether or not this is likely to antagonise other pharmacy bodies — bodies that will often have a differing agenda from that of the Society.

It may be difficult for some of our erstwhile leaders to take on board, but now more than ever, the genuine concerns of the membership have to be publicly acknowledged. Traditionally, the Society has shied away from making public pronouncements on anything vaguely confrontational or controversial, or from matters it views as outside its remit. Such sophistry surrounding remit or external political perceptions are of little interest to most of the profession. They are largely disinherited in what the new professional body feels it can or cannot say. They want it to reflect their professional needs and aspirations.

However important and potentially valuable the benefits of joining the new professional body prove to be, a large cohort of the profession has still to be convinced of the relevance or value of membership. It is inevitable that such disinterest will only be increased if the professional body fails to speak out on issues that matter. If nothing is heard from our leaders, the understandable and obvious perception will be that the professional body does not care enough to have an opinion, or is too frightened to rock the proverbial boat.

Employed community pharmacists and locums, the group that constitutes the majority of its potential membership, will inevitably draw the conclusion that the body does not understand the realities of community pharmacy practice and is not interested in community pharmacists. They will look elsewhere for their support and leadership, and vote with their feet.

I would contend that traditionally the Society has been, and continues to appear to be, more preoccupied by how it is viewed externally, than by reflecting the current needs and aspirations of all of its members.

It is imperative that this changes, and a more bullish approach is adopted. If it does not, the existence of the entire organisation will be put at risk and that can only be bad for the profession.

Much of what is being offered to its membership by the professional body is important, valuable and laudable. Potentially the profession will be able to develop and move forward if the new professional body can engage with the profession and deliver its ideas.

However, if the grassroots believe the Society is of no relevance to them it is doomed to fail. If this happens, pharmacy as a whole will be weakened and, along with it, the professional aspirations of these same community pharmacists who are currently looking for relevant leadership.

Ewan Black is a member of the Scottish Pharmacy Board of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society. The views expressed here are his personal views and do not necessarily reflect those of the board or the Society.