

Welcome everyone to the 84th Annual general meeting of the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland

Last year I was able to report to you about how the Society was rising to the challenge of change in regulation and representation of the profession. We had a new team within University Street leading the work on ensuring we retained a voice for pharmacy and the public within Northern Ireland. Our Minister had indicated that he would not make a decision on the future regulation/registration of pharmacists and the joining or not joining of a GPhC until it was set up and running.

I also indicated that we hoped to have new legislation based on the model we presented in our proposal “The future of Pharmacy registration, regulation and representation in Northern Ireland”. Unfortunately progress on this has been slower than anticipated, but we are anticipating draft regulations in the very near future.

Progress has been made in a number of areas though, including the publication of our new Code of Ethics, launched earlier this year at Stormont by the Minister of Health Michael McGimpsey. Our Code of Ethics is central to the role of the Society and provides pharmacists with a framework, to help protect the health and wellbeing of the public and to ensure ethical behaviour of all practitioners. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Michelle McCorry who led the work on the new code.

In the last few weeks we have seen the implementation of the Responsible Pharmacist Regulations. The Society published Professional Standards along with Good Practice Guidance in July. The changes in legislation requires the responsible Pharmacist to secure the safe and effective running of a pharmacy at all times and every pharmacist should now be aware of the procedures and records required to fulfil legal obligations.

Our Performance Review by the Council for Healthcare Regulatory Excellence took place earlier this year and again confirmed the organisation’s continued ability to meet the rising standards of regulation. However, once more the CHRE has urged greater urgency from Government in bringing forward a more modern legislative basis for our work. The CHRE are also naturally taking an interest in our plans for separating our regulatory and professional leadership functions and we look forward to engaging them further in the creation of our new Professional Forum as we move to the next stages following the completion of formal consultation with members.

As well as consulting on the Professional Forum, useful and highly informative consultations were held in relation to:

- The New Code of Ethics;
- The accompanying suite of Standards and Guidance;
- Standards and Guidance to support the Responsible Pharmacist Regulations; and,
- The future of the Pharmacist Benevolent Fund

Maintaining and improving our communication with the profession and the public will remain an essential element of our development over the next twelve months. The more we hear the views of all stakeholders, the more appropriate and better informed the decision

making process becomes, and this can only lead to better ownership of the outcomes by those affected.

Looking to the future and the question being asked around what is happening in Great Britain, with the splitting of the RPSGB into a new GPhC and new Professional leadership Body, and our model of a new Council with a new Professional forum and new Public forum.

To this I would say, research and our experience has demonstrated that an appropriate strategy or plan for one geographical area may not be as appropriate for another. This is after all the rationale for devolution – it allows for regulation and guidance to be flexible and responsive to local needs. In Northern Ireland devolved powers have already been used in areas such as licensing and planning laws as well as in our own pharmacy specific areas such as:

- How premises are inspected
- How we make use of the pharmacist's role within a community
- The ending of prescription charges

History teaches us that decisions taken at a local level are not only more effective but also create a sense of ownership and influence for those most affected by the outcomes.

The General Pharmaceutical Council/Professional Leadership Body model is something the profession in Great Britain felt best suited to their particular circumstances, geography and history. In the same sense however, the Council of the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland, having consulted its membership, decided that a locally present and accountable regulator, with a distinct Professional Forum, was the model which best suited the circumstances, history and geography of Northern Ireland.

Devolution affords us the opportunity to create a system of regulation and professional development which is truly responsive and accountable to the public and pharmacist in Northern Ireland.

Whilst it is the case that in the short two years it has been operating, the Northern Ireland Assembly has not yet made extensive use of its decision making powers over professional regulation, I believe, if retained, real benefit for patient and pharmacist alike could be made from the powers. To take an example, I personally would have liked to have seen much more scrutiny of the responsible Pharmacist regulations through the Assembly and a proper testing of the question as to whether or not the possibility of pharmacist absence was something appropriate for Northern Ireland. Certainly the feedback from our Public Forum would suggest the public are not in favour of pharmacies operating in the absence of a pharmacist. That more scrutiny was not given has to do with the current processes by which the Assembly permits Westminster to legislate in devolved matters. I know these matters are currently being looked into, and I hope they will lead to better investigation of such regulations in future.

Another area of difference that exists between Northern Ireland and Great Britain on pharmacy regulation is in our consideration of having a non practising register for pharmacists. The Council of the Society here are requesting the assembly to pass regulations

that would create a non-practising register. This would allow pharmacists who have retired, or are taking a career break, to keep in touch with the profession at no risk to the public but who would remain contactable in the event of a national emergency. This has been brought into sharp focus during the current preparations for the flu pandemic.

It is clear to me that being able to call upon the skills and experience of pharmacists not currently in practice could, in certain circumstances, be beneficial in protecting the public and potentially saving lives. So while Great Britain has decided against a non-practising register, one size does not always fit all. After all medics will be registered with the GMC but will only be able to practice if they are licensed. Is this not the same thing?

But it's important to emphasise too that I don't believe in difference simply for difference's sake. Where the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland and our colleagues in Great Britain can agree joint approaches on matters, we will, and frequently do. This year we have worked very closely with the RPSGB for example on:

- The continuing accreditation process of the University of Ulster Pharmacy School;
- The development of a UK-wide Code of Conduct for students and accompanying Fitness to Practise procedures;
- The early development of revalidation procedures and mechanisms; and
- Proposed changes to the 1968 Medicines Act

It's a very valuable and mature relationship that sees both partners working in areas of common interest.

Another example of our joint working I'd like to share with you has been the campaign to decriminalise single dispensing errors. This has seen collaboration between not only our two organisations, but stakeholders across the pharmacy sector, ably facilitated through the All Party Pharmacy Group in which we take part.

Recent activity from this organisation has seen us writing to all our MPs in Northern Ireland urging them to support Andrew Lansley MP's amendment to the current Health Bill to remove the criminalisation.

So, whilst much has been achieved in 2008/09, the year ahead will see further building of our vision for *"the Future of Pharmacy Registration, Regulation and Representation in Northern Ireland"*, including:

- The coming in to being of a new Professional Forum for pharmacy in Northern Ireland;
- The working through Stormont of a new regulatory framework for pharmacy in Northern Ireland;
- The modernisation of the Pharmacy Benevolent Fund;
- Consultation on Revalidation Proposals for pharmacy in Northern Ireland; and,
- Further development of the Professional Standards framework for pharmacy in Northern Ireland to help pharmacists meet day to day professional challenges whilst continuing to deliver excellence in service to the public.

Its shaping up to be another exciting, thought-provoking and stimulating year in the work of the Society and I hope some of you here tonight might consider having a part to play in it.

Detailed at the back of the Annual Reports, available in hard copy this evening, are the many ways to get involved. Whether through membership of Council, our Ethics and Law, Education and Practice Committees, or the Professional Forum, we value professional insights and perspectives. I, and my colleagues on Council would be more than happy to have a chat with you afterwards about what's involved and what Committee or avenue could be best suited for your own interests.

Afterall, we shouldn't forget, that amongst the many benefits of having regulation in Northern Ireland, is the accessibility of the regulatory process to Northern Ireland pharmacists. Society House is not only your locally maintained and staffed centre for advice and assistance with meeting regulation and standards, is also a portal for you to make input and convey your views.

I urge you to use it, not lose it.

Thank you very much.