Regime change afoot at the ABPI

At its recent annual conference (reported on p10), the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI) declared a mission to salvage its members’ damaged reputation.

Incoming President Lisa Anson set out a “bold and ambitious” raft of policy aims that may raise eyebrows among those members of the UK medical profession and the public disenchanted with an industry at the centre of the recent price-hiking scandals widely reported in this magazine and elsewhere.

Vowing to reverse the perception that pharma puts profit before patients, Anson said: “Our reputation is of vital importance to the future health of the nation, and productivity of the NHS and UK. While government, the NHS and patient groups all recognise the important steps taken in recent years to improve transparency in our sector, we must now build on that work. We should do much more to highlight the positive contributions of our industry. We must also be prepared to call out poor behaviour and separate ourselves from profiteering. This does irreparable damage to our reputation and the trust we want to promote.”

Welcome words indeed. If there was a time when the UK pharma industry needed strong and principled leadership to restore public and professional confidence, it is now.

NHS funding

Anson also raised an issue that worries many on both sides of the healthcare fence: access to medicines in the context of NHS cost savings. Calling for an extra £20bn of public money to fund new treatments, she said: “Industry, government and the NHS need to partner on a streamlined system of medicines access that values innovation and holds the NHS and industry to account for improving patient outcomes.”

Of course the politicians were quick to respond along the ‘she would say that, wouldn’t she?’ line but the fact remains that the UK spends a pitifully small amount of its gross domestic product on healthcare when compared with other developed countries. Indeed, the £20bn increase is what is needed to bring us in line with the 11.3% GDP spend of the rest of the G7 nations.

Without such an increase, we risk becoming deeply unattractive as a global centre for pharma investment. Who can honestly blame companies for reconsidering the UK as a research and development base if the NHS is unable to buy their products?

Anson, who is also president of AstraZeneca UK and Ireland, has even hinted that the sector is not averse to an increase in corporation tax.

Given pharma’s eagerness to do their bit, now would be a good time to address the situation. After all, time is not on our side. Add the vagaries of Brexit into the mix, such as the inevitable departure of the European Medicines Agency, and the ABPI’s dire warnings of the UK turning into a “desert for healthcare innovation” begin to sound more realistic than scaremongering.

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