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ANALYSIS • IN DEPTH • INFORMATION

## Weathering the storm

These are turbulent times for community pharmacy, but those who can navigate through the choppy water can hope for a better future. Here we look to the year past, the year ahead and offer advice on how to weather the storm.



It has been a tough 12 months for community pharmacy in England. At the centre of this was the High Court Judge's decision in May that 'with some regret' he was not able to overturn the government's decision to impose massive cuts on pharmacy. These cuts are now starting to bite, but the full implications are yet to unfold.

A variety of predictions for pharmacy closures have been tossed around in the news media and on social media since the Government announced its intention to reduce funding. The most recent figure is that around 2,700 community pharmacists could be at risk of closure due to a lack of financial viability.

The figure comes from industry data analysts PharmData, which based its calculations on statistics from the NHS

Business Services Authority. It follows the previous Health Minister, Alastair Burt, saying that up to 3,000 pharmacies could close due to the cuts (a statement he later abandoned, saying: 'We just don't know what the situation will be...')

The funding situation remains a dark cloud hanging over the profession, with more change on the horizon and uncertainty in the air, 2018 looks set to be another hard year for community pharmacy. But there is also the feeling in many quarters that those who can weather the storm will see the clouds begin to break.

### **You are the solution**

'I think it's vital that members keep believing in themselves,' says Ian Strachan, NPA Chairman. 'It's important to try and remain positive and remember that policies



### **Know your competition**

It is vital that all businesses know their competition and community pharmacy is no different. It's not just about knowing the products and services and the competition that they pose, it's also about knowing their approach to customer service and innovation. To put yourself in the best possible position to succeed, you need to gather as much information as you can.



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**“DELEGATION – THINK ABOUT THE ACTIVITIES YOU DO THAT SOMEONE ELSE IN THE TEAM COULD DO. WHY DO YOU CONTINUE TO DO THESE AND NOT DELEGATE? BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF AND PLAN TO CHANGE.”**


**Nick Hunter, Chief Officer, Doncaster, Rotherham and Nottinghamshire LPCs**

can change, positions can change and people can change, so be upbeat and look to the future.

‘We’ve come from a position where pharmacy was being viewed by some as a cost burden. The NPA has been fighting that and we are getting somewhere. These are issues that were not the NPA’s doing, but we are tackling them and we are communicating positive messages about community pharmacy.’

He adds: ‘There is a feeling that people are on their own, but they aren’t – the NPA

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**A service-led approach**

The days of pharmacy being seen principally as a distributor of medicines are over. Numerous reports over the last few years have said that for pharmacy to prosper, a service-led approach is needed. The number of services that pharmacists are now able to offer has increased dramatically over recent years and with the margin on pharmacy income coming from filling prescriptions dwindling, embracing services will continue to be important.

is there to support them and they just need to get through this period and prepare as far as possible for the medium- and long-term too. They should feel rest assured that we are doing everything that we can to make sure pharmacy is seen as an answer, not a question; as a solution, not a problem.’

The short-term will not be easy for healthcare professionals across the board.

While the Government announced an extra cash injection for the NHS in the budget, the consensus appears to be that it is still billions short from being enough to help the service move towards a clean bill of health. However, there are measures that



**“INFORMATION IS KEY. GET GOOD INFORMATION OFTEN. IF YOU SPOT A PROBLEM, DON’T DELAY - ACT.”**

**Michael Hewitson, Independent Contractor, Beaminster Pharmacy**



### Customer first

The pharmacist’s relationship with the patient is the profession’s unique selling point. In no other area of the NHS can members of the public access help and advice from a healthcare professional without an appointment. It is a relationship that the public value greatly – evidenced by the fact that more than two million people signed the petition to support their pharmacies against the cuts.

## Know your community

As the customer is critical to the community pharmacy, it is vital to know what they need, and not to assume what they want. This can be achieved on an individual basis by interacting and requesting feedback. But also of importance is demographic information. There is a wide variety published, for example local council release area profiles, which can help community pharmacies target their offerings.

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pharmacists can take to help them get through this tough period. Ten of these are listed in boxes throughout this article, alongside top tips from members.

## Crisis is opportunity

Despite the tough times, at the NPA Conference and the Pharmacy Show, held on consecutive days in October, there was

a feeling of positivity and people were striving for answers and solutions, rather than dwelling on the problems.

James Roach, Transformation Lead at the NPA, spoke at both events. He has been commissioned

“FOCUS ON ALL THE SERVICES PROVIDED BY THE PHARMACY – STAFF SHOULD MAKE EVERY CONTACT COUNT BY UPSELLING AND PROMOTING MINOR AILMENTS, BLOOD PRESSURE CHECKS, FLU VACCINES, MURS, NMS, REPEAT DISPENSING, REPEAT COLLECTION SERVICE AND NOMINATIONS.”

Raj R Patel, Managing Director and Superintendent Pharmacist, Mount Elgon Pharmacy

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## Work closely with GPs

This was a constant theme mentioned in seminars at the Pharmacy Show this year. Jay Patel, Executive Director at Day Lewis, ran a session dedicated to the topic. He said: ‘Patients need pharmacists to work more closely with GPs. The NHS wants people to work collaboratively together and it’s something that we need to focus on for the good of our profession. We need to support each other, not work against each other.’

to engage with and influence Sustainability and Transformation Partnerships and sees a positive future for the sector.

‘It is absolutely clear that community pharmacy is the solution that we need to invest in – it’s my view that the NHS needs community pharmacy more than ever before. This crisis is community pharmacy’s opportunity,’ he says.

‘You are a highly regarded clinical profession and the most valuable part of





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### Utilise technology

Investing in technology can have a big impact on business. It can be used to free up valuable time, by reducing repetitive tasks and streamlining processes. Robots will be great for some pharmacies, but aren't always the answer. However, this is also about utilising technology you already have or investing in computer programmes and apps that will pay for themselves through financial savings.

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the supply chain is your relationship with and understanding of the user. This is about getting in the face of commissioners and proving what is possible, if you are properly commissioned by the NHS.' (see p.36 *inpharmacy*, Autumn 2017 for more about James Roach's work).

Jasmine Shah, Practice Pharmacist at the NPA, also spoke at both events and stresses that to survive the tough times and thrive

in the future, pharmacies need to form a strategy for what they hope to achieve and how to go about it. But, first and foremost, they need to know their numbers.

'What is your mission for the next 12 months?' she asks. 'You need to look at what you want to do and what you want to change. You need to look at the short-, medium- and long-term.'

'That is a critical first step – efficient planning is a key requirement.'

She continues: 'You need to ensure that the whole pharmacy team is engaged so that there is the room created to deliver all those pharmacy services and you need to know your numbers – what is your best-selling OTC product, for example?'



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### Promote yourself

It is often claimed that previously pharmacy has not shouted loudly enough about the role it plays. In an age when commissioners are looking for value for money, it's important to be vocal about the work that is done – especially the added-value that pharmacy provides. This can be done through social media, face-to-face interactions and engaging with politicians, decision-makers and the local media.

### Change is coming

The NPA has launched a range of resources and tools over the last year to help pharmacists navigate their way through the



**“GET THE NPA BUSINESS EFFICIENCY FOLDER AND DO A 360-DEGREE REVIEW OF YOUR BUSINESS. ALSO, ENGAGE YOUR STAFF IN LOOKING FOR EFFICIENCIES – REMEMBER, YOU’RE NOT THE ONLY PERSON WHO MIGHT HAVE A BRIGHT IDEA.”**

Noel Wicks, Managing Director, Right Medicine Pharmacy

### Invest in staff

It's often a natural instinct in times of economic hardship to cut back on spending, but investing in your pharmacy team can lead to new business opportunities. Also, investment in staff training is relatively cheap, can make a big difference to revenue and can make your team feel valued and motivated.



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## Take a step back

It can be hard to find time to take a step back from working in your business, to work on your business. But taking the time to get an overview of what is happening, challenges that you face and how you are dealing with them can be very important. A small amount of time spent looking at your business can lead to changes that have a big impact.



tough times. See p.36, for information on some of the data-based resources; there have also been clinical and educational tools, alongside information packs and promotional materials. And the coming year is set to see even more launches from the NPA.

‘The biggest challenge that members are facing is cashflow and feeling despondent and isolated,’ says NPA Chairman Ian Strachan. ‘I think some community pharmacists feel like the sector hasn’t got many friends at the moment, but there is undoubtedly change coming down the track and there is light at the end of the tunnel. There are

“WORK SMART AND USE TIME MANAGEMENT. FULL TEAM ENGAGEMENT IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER AND PHARMACISTS NEED TO MAXIMISE THEIR EXPERTISE – MUR, NMS, CLINICAL AND DIAGNOSTIC SERVICES – AND THE WHOLE TEAM NEED TO FOCUS ON THOSE AREAS THAT SUCCEED IN QUALITY PAYMENT CRITERIA BEING MET BENEFITTING THE PATIENT OUTCOME AND BUSINESS SURVIVAL.”

Brian Deal, Superintendent Pharmacist, Ashwell Pharmacy

resources coming from the NPA that will help members with cashflow and with their business models.’

He adds that since Steve Brine replaced David Mowat as Pharmacy Minister, there has been a promising change in the mood music but tangible policy changes are yet to materialise. ‘We’ve got to be positive because there can be change. We have a new minister, who is listening and hearing what we are saying. He seems to understand what pharmacy does, he sees the trust and respect that the public has for community pharmacy and that’s vital.’

The community pharmacy sector has fundamental strengths, which should eventually assert themselves, despite the immense pressures: pharmacies unify the premises, the pharmacy team and the business – thereby maximising access, continuity of care and sustainable development of services over time. If the sector, politicians and NHS managers make the right choices in the period ahead, the network of local pharmacies will remain the beating heart of pharmaceutical care in the community for decades to come. ☺



## Utilise the NPA

The NPA can help and advise you on the previous nine points – from technical resources to benchmark against competitors, to information packs and SOPs, social media advice and training courses. So, take advantage of all that is on offer to help you weather the storm.