UK drug prescriptions

Mixed reaction to generics report

THE publication last week of a government-commissioned report recommending moves to encourage general practitioners (GPs) to prescribe more unbranded drugs has drawn howls of protest from the Association of British Pharmaceutical Industries (ABPI).

The report, by an Informal Working Group under the chairmanship of Dr P.R. Greenfield, was established to "identify ways of encouraging effective prescribing". Among its recommendations are more effective training of GPs in the cost effectiveness of alternative therapies and pleas for a more effective liaison between GPs and hospital doctors and it suggests that pharmacists dealing with GPs' prescriptions should be allowed to dispense alternative "generic" versions of an approved name formulation unless the doctor specifically indicates a preference for the proprietary brand. The report says that this could bring about "a significant change in the pattern of prescribing which would result in savings to the National Health Service".

Generic prescribing is already the practice in most hospital pharmacy departments, where local committees approve the generic substitutes used. In 1960 the Hindcliffe Commission recommended that all individual patients' prescriptions should use official titles, but by 1980 only 20 per cent of prescriptions were written by approved names, and the Greenfield report draws attention to the "commercial pres-

ures" exerted on doctors through advertising. It also notes that proprietary names, unlike chemical titles, are devised so as to be memorable.

The report comes at a sensitive time for the pharmaceutical industry, which was the subject of adverse comment following a recent BBC "Panorama" programme which dealt with drug companies' promotion practices. ABPI says that a move towards generic prescribing would cause an "immediate loss of confidence in the industry and result in less pharmaceutical research being located in Britain".

At present, according to ABPI, 10 per cent of world pharmaceutical research is carried out in the United Kingdom (although the market is only 4 per cent of the world total) and in 1982 it generated a £600 million balance of payments surplus. Generic substitution, it says, would result in price increases and a "substantial reduction in the present 70,000 workforce in the pharmaceutical industry itself and the peripheral supplying industries involving thousands more".

ABPI also questions the suggested savings to the National Health Service: Mr Peter Lumley, public affairs manager of ABPI, says that additional safety measures would have to be introduced to ensure that substitutes were subject to the same high quality control standards as the branded versions. The Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain will cooperate with the Department of Health and Social Security to find ways of encouraging more generic prescribing but agrees on the need to ensure that substitutes are really identical, since under the new proposals patients would have no guarantee that they were getting the same preparation from one prescription to the next. The British Medical Association is unlikely to object to the moves in principle, but GPs will also need to be reassured about quality controls on unbranded drugs, and for some 30 or so common drugs no substitute is likely to be acceptable.

On the subject of GPs' training, the report recommends action to increase the awareness of cost effectiveness of different drugs, and even goes so far as to recommend compulsory courses in basic economic management techniques for all physicians. This recommendation was heartily endorsed by Dr Carne, senior tutor in General Practice at Hammersmith Medical School, who says that doctors seem to have forgotten about cost effectiveness in choosing therapies.

Mr Norman Fowler, Secretary of State for Social Services, has welcomed most of the report's findings but has balked at the prescribing suggestions on generic substitution. Until 15 April he is consulting on the matter with "interested parties".

Tim Beardsley

Paranormal hoaxer comes clean

St Louis

JAMES "the amazing" Randi held a press conference in late January to announce how he fooled researchers at Washington University who were studying the paranormal. Randi is a magician who has been associated with *Scientific American's* former columnist Martin Gardner, in a campaign to expose fraud in parapsychology.

Randi had sent two young self-proclaimed psychics, who were actually his protégés in the magic business, to the university's McDonnell Laboratory for Psychical Research in the autumn of 1979. Researchers at the laboratory studied them in 10 sessions between autumn 1979 and last July, observing their supposed ability to bend objects, produce images on film and read sealed letters. The laboratory published optimistic reports in the journal *Research on Parapsychology* in 1981 and 1982. The pair of psychics were the "most promising" subjects the laboratory had encountered, according to Peter Phillips, the director of the laboratory.

Randi played both sides of the experiment by also offering Phillips advice on

how to detect fraud in the psychics. In August 1981, Phillips sent a tape of the two psychics to Randi, who explained to him how they could be simply using magic. Phillips now admits "we should have taken his help earlier than we did". Also in August, Phillips's suspicions were aroused when he heard at a meeting that the two psychics might be fakes. In September he issued a statement saying the subjects were promising but that "ordinary explanations exist for these events".

Two more experiments were run with the pair, this time under more tightly controlled conditions, and Phillips became thoroughly suspicious. No more paranormal phenomena were observed in these tests, and the experimental programme was stopped.

The research was funded by the McDonnell Foundation and reflects the interest of James McDonnell, the founder of the giant McDonnell aircraft corporation, in psychic phenomena.

Phillips said he felt the laboratory came out looking good because his researchers had been cautious in their claims. And he endorses what Randi set out to achieve. "I don't resent Randi one bit — I think he's just great."

Karen Freeman

Industrial support of US academic research

CORPORATE support of academic research in the United States is greater than is generally believed, according to a report published by the National Science Board, the policy-making body of the National Science Foundation. The difference between the figures generally released and the actual figures is accounted for by university grants which are not reported as coming from industrial sources, by the donation or loan of equipment, and by the failure of universities to report grants from corporate sponsored foundations as being a type of industrial support. □