

Maintaining Excellence in Pharmacy Education

In "The Merchant of Venice," William Shakespeare wrote that "The quality of mercy is not strained . . ." That may be true for mercy, but it is not true for education. Pharmacy education, in particular, is being subjected to stresses and strains that are expected to intensify and grow worse in the years immediately ahead.

The best facilities, the best students, and the best curricula will rarely produce high-quality graduates in the absence of a teaching faculty that is of comparable talent. And it is in that area of faculty quality that a growing number of individuals and groups are beginning to express serious concern.

Current faculties are generally competent and adequate. The great majority of faculty members received their advanced training when new graduate students regularly constituted "the cream of the crop" from the previous year's graduating class. Following advanced study and after taking advanced degrees, a major portion of these select graduate students chose teaching as a career. As a consequence, each new generation of students received its training from the very best of the previous generation's crop.

In recent years, however, this pattern has been changing, and it is this change that is arousing concern.

APhA Academy of Pharmaceutical Sciences President Kenneth R. Heimlich addressed the matter in his November 1982 interim report.

" . . . graduate education in the pharmaceutical sciences received considerable discussion (by the APS Executive Committee). Concern was raised over both the ability to attract talented students to graduate studies in the pharmaceutical sciences and to obtain funding for those students who do apply."

Dr. Heimlich went on to describe specific actions taken by the APS and several of its sections in an effort to focus attention on the problem of declining graduate student quality.

Pharmacy students themselves have noted this trend of declining interest in graduate study; the Student APhA has gone so far as to pass a resolution regarding the problem, and to sponsor several programs in an effort to identify remedies for it.

Years ago, when the undergraduate program in pharmacy was being shifted to a minimum five-year curriculum, many educators expressed concern that it would ultimately have an adverse effect on pharmacy graduate

degree programs. Acknowledging the benefits of a five-year program for professional practice, many of these same educators suggested a "two-track" undergraduate program in which the student could opt either for a five-year professional degree or a four-year degree as preparation for graduate school studies and an advanced academic degree—generally as preparation for a career in research and/or teaching.

But even that "two-track" approach was not without its problems. In particular, many young people do not know clearly what their career objectives are when they finish four or five years of college. To expect them to make such specific choices at the beginning of their college work would be an unrealistic expectation.

Consequently, no simple or readily apparent answer appears currently available to resolve this dilemma.

In the meantime, a very large proportion of the applicants to graduate studies in the pharmaceutical sciences are graduates of four-year nonpharmacy programs or from four-year foreign pharmacy schools. And the admission standards for the five-year graduate of American pharmacy schools are much lower than in the past. The cumulative result of these factors is that the overall talent reflected in the present and recent graduate student bodies is not of the traditional select caliber that was the norm until about 10 years ago.

Gradually, the composite excellence of those granted M.S. and, in particular, Ph.D. degrees has been declining. In turn, the same erosion of high quality is beginning to occur within pharmacy faculty and research ranks as these recent graduates have emerged to take their place in the classroom and research laboratory.

Unfortunately, we have no ready solution to offer. At this time, we can only join Dr. Heimlich and his colleagues in the APS in noting the existence of the problem and in urging that prompt attention be devoted to it by appropriate groups. In particular, this would appear to be a key issue for review and study by the APhA Task Force on Pharmacy Education. As discussed above, it is an issue that will have an ultimate impact on the very heart of the quality of pharmacy education.

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