Board of science chair’s message

Welcome to the autumn 2016 edition of the friends of the board of science bulletin. It is a great pleasure to take over the chair of the board from Professor Sheila the Baroness Hollins. Sheila has chaired the board most effectively and inspiringly over the last three years and will certainly be a hard act to follow! I would like to thank her for all her hard work which has enabled the board to produce some excellent work.

I have been most impressed by the achievements of the board and look forward to working alongside its members. For those who don’t know of me, I am a former President of the BMA and am currently Professor of Medicine and Education at Barts and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry, Queen Mary University of London. Apart from medicine itself, my interests lie in education and research.

I hope you enjoy this bulletin which gives the latest news on what the board has been working on over recent months. Our work has focused on prescribed drugs, ageing, and the impact of austerity and welfare reform on health.

The austerity briefing

The board has just published a briefing looking at the impacts of austerity and associated welfare reforms on health. This reflects doctors’ concerns that austerity policies are disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable groups in society, including those on low incomes, as well as those unable to work because of disability or long-term illness. The briefing has highlighted ways in which health is adversely affected, including the increased prevalence of mental health conditions and deterioration of existing health conditions, as well as broader impacts on inequality, poverty, material deprivation and job prospects. It has also considered what action can be taken to prevent and mitigate this harm, including the role doctors can play in supporting their patients.

The prescribed drugs project

The board has been developing a piece of work on prescribed drugs associated with dependence and withdrawal since 2013. Following a call for evidence, the board published an analysis report in October 2015, bringing together the views of a wide range of stakeholders. We have subsequently hosted two new roundtable meetings in February and June 2016 to discuss what collaborative actions can be taken, with specific organisations agreeing to lead on taking each of the agreed actions forward. We are currently liaising with different organisations to review progress on these actions and considering how we continue to move forward.
Growing older in the UK
The BMA is developing a major programme of work on ‘healthy ageing’. The health of older people and supporting the process of healthy ageing is not an area in which the BMA has substantial policy; this programme of work aims to contribute to the development of a comprehensive public policy approach to ensuring the health and wellbeing of an ageing population.

To support this work the board has been overseeing the development of a series of briefing papers on ‘Growing older in the UK’. These briefings – planned for release in late September – have each been written by experts in their respective fields, and explore a range of health policy challenges associated with ageing in the UK. As well as broad policy recommendations, they each contain proposed actions that individual doctors can take to support the process of growing older in the UK.

Other BoS work
The board of science is also developing work on pain relief and analgesic use, and feeding into some BMA-wide work on a vision for better mental health.

About the board
The work of the board of science enables the BMA to publicise key medical evidence to a wide audience. We lead the debate on important scientific and public health issues for the benefit of doctors and patients. Find out more about the board’s work and remit here.

The board of science secretariat
The board of Science is supported by board of science committee secretary – Matt Lasham.