

Drug company chiefs accept the need for more openness

Lynn Eaton *London*

Officials from two major pharmaceutical companies—GlaxoSmithKline and AstraZeneca—have accepted that the public needs more openness from the industry.

Dr John Patterson, executive vice president for product strategy, licensing, and business development at AstraZeneca (UK) and Eddie Gray, senior vice president and general manager at GlaxoSmithKline Pharma (UK), were among the witnesses questioned by the House of Commons health select committee last week. They were giving evidence as part of the committee's ongoing inquiry into the influence of the pharmaceutical industry in the United Kingdom.

"There is a feeling that expectations have shifted," said Mr Gray. "It's like trying to catch a train that is already moving," he admitted.

Both accepted there had been a marked change in public attitudes to health issues, fuelled both by general media coverage of health issues and by specific coverage when a new drug was launched or if something went wrong with a drug.

But the public did not understand what acceptable levels of risk were, argued Dr Patterson.

"People are not well versed in many fields in talking about relative risk. When there is an issue of tolerability, to put that in the context of the number of people who are dying of that disease does not always fit well within a 20 second sound bite on television," he said.

The committee's chairman, David Hinchliffe, suggested that, rather than just expecting the public to understand these issues better, the industry might be able to be more transparent about its research and the way it operated. Mr Gray pointed to the recent

voluntary move to make all clinical trial results available on the web (*BMJ* 2005;330:109, 15 Jan).

Although reluctant to comment on behalf of the industry as a whole, the witnesses denied that their companies had ever had research findings "ghost written" (written up by a professional writer working for the drug company)—an allegation made against the industry in previous committee hearings. However, Dr Patterson admitted that professional writers did work alongside research authors, assisting in getting a paper up to publishable standards.

"But it isn't always easy to get negative results published," he said, in response to questions about why drug companies sometimes seemed to "cherry pick" only the positive results from various trials.

Another witness, Dr Stuart Dollow, vice president of the medical division of GlaxoSmithKline, fiercely denied any suggestion that the industry was inventing illnesses to sell drugs to treat the condition. "It is not

something we would do," he said.

Asked why his company had seemed reluctant to change its advice on the potential withdrawal symptoms for people coming off paroxetine (Seroxat), Mr Dollow said that there had been several trials, using the drug at different doses and that only one small trial had shown this effect. He said the changes in the patient information leaflet showed that the industry was able to improve the quality of such leaflets.

However, Mr Dollow seemed unaware that, before the debate in an early day motion about Seroxat, in February 2004 in the House of Commons, the company had failed to respond to a request for information from MP Paul Flynn. Mr Flynn suggested in that debate that GlaxoSmithKline had "deliberately suppressed information on the danger of Seroxat" (see www.publications.parliament.uk). □

Reports of the health select committee hearings are available at www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/health_committee.cfm

Children face same social problems as they did 100 years ago

Zosia Kmietowicz *London*

Too many children in the United Kingdom continue to face many of the same problems today that they did 100 years ago, says a report from UK children's charity Barnardo's. These include poverty, neglect, abuse, and discrimination.

Vulnerability to sexual exploitation is just one of the many problems that were around in 1905, when Dr Thomas Barnardo died, says the report, compiled to mark the centenary of the founder's death. But modern society has produced new ways in which children can be exploited—for example, via new technologies, such as the internet and mobile phones.

According to the report, *Then and Now*, child poverty rates last year were 54% in inner London and 17% across the United Kingdom as a whole. When children are poor, they are more vulnerable to abuse and discrimination as well as marginalisation by society in general, it says.

In the past three years, Barnar-

do's has dealt with more than 4000 children and young people who live in fear of sexual exploitation. Rape, sexual assault, and physical injuries are common, says the report. Prostitution increases the risk of sexually transmitted infections, infertility, and terminations, as well as psychological and behavioural problems.

The charity has launched an appeal to raise £1m (\$1.9m; €1.4m) to fund 16 community based services across the United Kingdom to help children who have been sexually exploited. It is also calling on the police to do more to identify and prosecute adults who exploit children.

Barnardo's also says that a statutory maximum rate of interest should be set in the United Kingdom, in line with most other European countries, to protect poor families from exploitation by credit card companies and loan sharks.

Another children's charity, the Child Poverty Action Group, has published a 10 step plan to

eradicate child poverty. "Poverty is a complex, multifaceted problem, and so too are its solutions. Many government policies have the potential to impact on child poverty, including education, housing, health, and transport," said Kate Green, chief executive of the group. "We are calling for a poverty impact assessment to be made for every new policy." Policies not focused on fighting poverty should be changed accordingly, she said.

Among the proposals in the 10 step plan are reduced taxa-

tion for poorer families, good quality universal child care, better rather than just more jobs, and more immediate reform of welfare benefits.

"Reforming the administration of tax credits and benefits is fundamental," said Ms Green. □

Then and Now is available at www.barnardos.org.uk/whoware/centenary/files/ThenNowReport.pdf The Child Poverty Action Group's 10 step plan is available at www.cpag.org.uk



Living conditions would have been poor for this family in London's East End, 1912, but poverty, neglect, and abuse are still problems today