

A note from Vegas



Over 100 delegates flew across the Atlantic for the ninth annual Avicenna Conference held last month. While the emphasis remained on providing increased, and relevant, services to the patients, the future of healthcare in the UK was also looked upon as well as the impact of IT on the pharmacy sector. Faras Ghani revisits the business sessions that were complemented aptly by the social events in Las Vegas...

Emphasis on providing increased services was the aim of the ninth annual Avicenna Conference in Las Vegas last month. Salim Jetha, Avicenna's CEO, made this point very clear by repeatedly uttering 'services, services, services' before explaining how that is the way forward for not only the members but also pharmacy in general.

While speakers presented on a variety of topics ranging from generics, parallel imports (PIs), and implementation of technology in the business to discussing the Health Bill 2009, it was the 'services for the future' message that was highlighted throughout both sessions.

Sharing results from a survey undertaken recently by Avicenna, Jetha said that the biggest issues facing the pharmacy world were stress, Category M and administration burden. 'While the financial and time management issues are weighing pharmacists down greatly – with both being inter-related – you need to ensure that your time is spent in the correct places,' he said.

The message – of freeing up valuable time to spend on more effective tasks for the business – was echoed around the hall by Trevor Gore, sales development controller at Reckitt Benckiser, as well. 'Pharmaci-

sts are control freaks,' Gore said. 'You need to drop all the administration tasks and cut down on dispensing as well. That is not why you became pharmacists. Book-keeping and dispensing can be done by computer programs and robots. You need to invest time offering services that hold value for the patients, delegate tasks and inform your staff – your biggest asset – of new ways of shaping the pharmacy world.'

Earlier, Bharat Shah, managing director Sigma Pharmaceuticals, highlighted issues facing independent pharmacies following the changes in the NHSPricing and commissioning. The absence of a mid-term review, supply

shortages, on-going margins inquiry, and the lack of price per dose were some of the concerns raised in the presentation.

Keeping in line with the concerns, Shaun McCormick, director of sales (south) for Cordia Healthcare Group, termed 2008 as the 'year of tumultuous change'. 'We have witnessed a worsening exchange rate, generic price deflation, and fierce competition among shortliners,' McCormick said. 'With PIs falling away, less time should be spent on price negotiation and more on offering increased services in order to survive.'

The emphasis on undertaking more and more MURs was also emphatically delivered to the attendees by a majority of the speakers. It was not just the financial benefits that pharmacists can obtain by undertaking the reviews but also place trust in patients' minds and ensure pharmacy becomes the first stop for health-related queries.

Terming the conference a great success, David Gratton, chairman Avicenna, predicted a strong showing from Avicenna in the coming months and remained optimistic of its continued upward performance despite the economic gloom engulfing the world.



Speakers and sponsors at the conference

View from the top

Pharmacy is a very isolated profession and seldom do pharmacists get a chance to network and interact with their colleagues. One of the objectives of this conference was to allow pharmacists with an opportunity to do exactly that. And learn from each other. The other objective was to hear from and talk to industry experts which will benefit them greatly.

We also tend to involve business with fun because pharmacists are always discussing work so we thought we'll make this enjoyable for them. It acts as a useful bonding exercise and the conference turned out to be a one big family affair.

Listening to comments from the attendees, it was welcoming to hear what is going on nationally as well as across the Atlantic, as portrayed by our speakers from USA and Canada. From the

business sessions, I'd ideally want our members to go back and realise that to stay in the game, yesterday's work practice will not suffice. They need to consider new things – this is where services come in – and new innovations. The industry is heavily burdened via administration tasks and I would advise pharmacists to release the time spent on those tasks and utilise for tasks beneficial for their own self and the business.

There is a general consensus that we need to work together; adopting an interdependent model rather than an independent model. The need to get together and discuss issues was greatly felt and this



The Avicenna board: (from left) Raj Haria, Salim Jetha, David Gratton, Uma Patel, Shiraz Jiwani

conference has allowed us just that.
 Salim Jetha
 CEO Avicenna plc

It's Vegas, baby

The conference is not just about business networking and presentations, Salim Jetha, Avicenna's CEO, had made it clear prior to the event. He wanted the members, having endured the 11-hour flight from Gatwick to McCarran International with their families, to experience a family atmosphere and enjoy their stay.

Judging by reactions and the looks on everyone's faces, enjoy it they did. On the menu for the next five days was an Italian dinner amid a Lamborghini galore; a rather drizzly rafting experience down Colorado River drenched not only by the spray (and the rain that we had seem to carry with us across the Atlantic) but also the history of the area; a traditional subcontinent dinner – declared the best he has ever had by



Delegates and their families enjoying the rafting experience... before the rain.



Priya Patel enjoying the Rat Pack company

Uma Patel, director Avicenna – and drinks on the 51st floor; and a farewell date with the Rat Pack.

In between those and the business sessions was a tour of the Grand Canyon – a must, according to experts, for anyone stopping over in Las Vegas – regular visits to the roulette tables and

a walk down the neon-lit Vegas strip.

Welcome change for the pharmacists from the daily hectic rituals and the verbal mauling – albeit justified – they received from the speakers at the business sessions. For the wives – a fair few were partners in their husbands' business – and children, it was a welcome Easter break. And with Elvis making a surprise visit his presence felt in the house during the farewell dinner, it served energy enough for the long journey back home.



The 51st floor... and moving up

Future of healthcare

'Direction of travel cannot be changed but it is important for pharmacists to align themselves with the direction' were Ajit Malhi's words of wisdom during his presentation at the Avicenna Conference in Las Vegas. Malhi, director of marketing services at AAH Pharmaceuticals, stressed that the UK health market will undergo major changes as UK's population increases 12 per cent between 2004 and 2031, especially as the over-65 age group has seen a two per cent increase since 1981.

'Life expectancy is ten per cent higher than it was in 1960 and over-60s account for 58 per cent of all scripts dispensed,' Malhi said. 'On average, there are 38.4 items dispensed per year for that age-group, much higher when compared to under-60s (that stands at 14.3). The number of elderly patients will rise by 5.5 million by 2040 and will form a huge segment of the healthcare market.'

Speaking from a pharmacist's point of view – his Saturday mornings are spent in a pharmacy – Malhi, in a similar manner to the preceding speakers, urged others to focus on developing their services. 'While performing your daily tasks, you also need to focus on aspects of marketing and improve your skillset. You need to take your business into local establishments like schools and engage with NHS and PCTs by talking to them.'

