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Healthcare is rapidly evolving, Avicenna conference delegates in Zanzibar heard. But pharmacy can capitalise on the changes as opportunity, **Jennifer Richardson** reports from the Spice Island

The sands of time



Core role in reducing inequalities

Pharmacy is "central" to reducing health inequalities in England, the country's deputy chief medical officer said.

The pharmacy network's core customer groups often mirrored the target populations for health inequality improvement, said Dr Fiona Adshead, including the elderly, families with young children and the unemployed.

"We think pharmacy on the high street is so central to tackling inequalities and improving people's health," she said.

Avicenna chief executive Salim Jetha thanked Dr Adshead for her confidence in pharmacy to deliver. He said: "We have a government that needs our help to deliver the healthcare agenda."

But one conference delegate asked: "What benefits are there for the pharmacist in engaging in tackling inequalities?"

Dr Adshead said health inequality initiatives could be linked to other pharmacy offerings, improving a pharmacy's brand and footprint.

And UniChem chief operating officer Jeremy Main said pharmacy needed to prove its worth to the



government, in order to reap financial benefits. "Independent pharmacy needs to be able to show that it is worth investing the money into," he said.

RPSGB president Hemant Patel said that, as well as making "sound business sense", there was social motivation to tackle health inequalities. "Shouldn't I be using my expertise to help others?" Mr Patel asked.

However, another conference delegate, who wished to remain anonymous, questioned how pharmacists would find the time to take on new roles to tackle health inequalities.

"We're expected to take on all these extra roles, but we still have to adhere to our main job of dispensing prescriptions," he said. "There's never been the payment or the support. [The government is] expecting more and giving us less."



Avicenna chief executive (left) and other conference speakers (above with board members) encouraged members to see change as an opportunity rather than a threat

Use marketing techniques to improve public health

Pharmacy should use marketing techniques to "sell" behaviour to improve public health, independent contractors have been told.

Social marketing expert Professor Jeff French said the term meant "using marketing for the benefit of people rather than profit", and that pharmacists were "really well placed" to do this.

With six million people a day passing through UK pharmacies, the profession already had "fantastic" data on its customers, said Professor French, director of the National Social Marketing Centre. But the information needed to be used more effectively to understand those customers, and work out how to convince them to change their behaviour for the benefit of their health.

Professor French said: "The right question is: how can we create products and services that make

it fun, easy and popular for usually poor people to implement change?"

UniChem chief operating officer Jeremy Main said the Department of Health had already embraced social marketing as a method of achieving health outcomes. Independent pharmacies needed to prove they could be involved in this agenda along with the largest multiples, he said.

Delegates expressed mixed responses to the idea. "I think it's going to become very important," said former pharmacy owner Sharad Parikh. "It will evolve into the new pharmacy structure."

But another delegate suggested social marketing could be considered unethical. "What if people don't want to change?" he asked.

Dr French said it was not about forcing people to change. "It's about supporting people who do want to change," he said.

Independents can learn from the multiples

Independent pharmacy should learn some lessons from the multiple model and outlook, contractors have been told.

A recent survey of Avicenna members found 85 per cent were pessimistic about the future of independent pharmacy. But the buying group's chief executive Salim Jetha pointed out most pharmacies sold were bought by the multiples. "It's exactly the same business independents have discarded and multiples have seen as an opportunity," he said. "Are we missing a trick?"

UniChem director of sales John Geddes said independents needed to change their mindsets to see

change as an opportunity rather than a threat. "Multiples are growing for a reason," he said. "They can see the opportunities and they're building on it."

One Avicenna member told his fellow contractors how he had benefited from the expertise of multiple pharmacy while retaining his independent status by joining a UK trial of Alphega, UniChem's pan-European virtual chain.

This was a "win-win situation", said Shilen Patel of Healthchem Pharmacy in Balham, London. The Alphega refit, fascia and eight-weekly promotional campaigns had already increased footfall for Healthchem, he said.

Third sector key partner

Pharmacists should develop links with local voluntary organisations to respond to their communities' health needs, RPSGB president Hemant Patel said.

Just two conference delegates knew what patient groups existed in their areas. Mr Patel said contractors were missing an opportunity to seize PCTs' attention.

Voluntary groups had strong influence at PCT level, he said. It was therefore important for pharmacies to build partnerships with local patient organisations. "We want to make sure we create trust with these very important influential groups and help them understand why pharmacy could play a role," Mr Patel added.

This contact with the third sector needed to be achieved at a national level as well as locally, he added.

Innovate to accumulate

Independent pharmacists must look forward and innovate in order to survive and thrive in changing circumstances, Avicenna conference speakers said.

Chief executive Salim Jetha said: "The world is rapidly changing and we have to look not only at the threats but also at the opportunities it could bring."

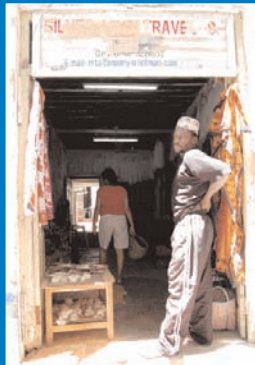
Contractors were over-reliant on the NHS and its worsening terms, said Daniel Herman, CEO of Bio-Synergy, the sports and weight management supplement company in which Avicenna has a 50 per cent share. They needed to "reinvent" themselves, he said: "Address current issues with a new approach and change your methodology."

Pharmacies, particularly in

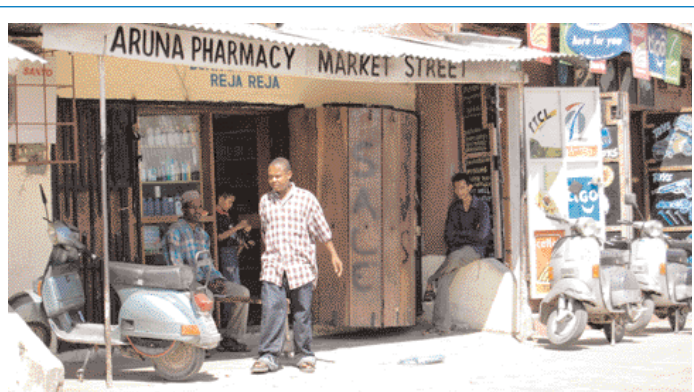
London, should be looking to capitalise on the 2012 Olympics. Mr Herman suggested sponsoring a local sports team or athlete.

And they should also view the current economic downturn as an opportunity. "The consumer is going to be even more focused on service and price. This is a great opportunity for pharmacy to shine," Mr Herman said.

Conference delegates heard from one contractor who has thrived under the new contract. Pankaj Mahidharia explained how the success of infoHealth, a small chain of pharmacies plus e-pharmacy, had been built on solid relationships with GPs and PCTs, investment in IT and the use of patient feedback.



Between discussions on marketing and multiples, delegates took time out to visit Zanzibar's old Stone Town (left and above) and the spice farms for which the island is famed (right). See page 34 and www.chemistanddruggist.co.uk/events for more pictures and instructions on uploading your own images



Avicenna has pledged to fund the building of wells in Zanzibar communities. Chief executive Salim Jetha, who was born on the Tanzanian island, said: "In the UK we take for granted clean, drinkable water." The buying group will leave its legacy to the exotic conference location through the donations of members

Buying group aims for 1,000-strong membership

Avicenna aims to increase its membership from 700 to 1,000, newly-appointed chairman David Gratton said.

The buying group's strategy was to grow the business "both organically and through mergers and acquisitions", he said, although it was not currently in talks with any particular group.

Mr Gratton ruled out selling the company but said stock market flotation, first mooted at the 2006

conference, was still being considered: "But only if and when the time is right, and only after full consultation with our members."

Avicenna had taken on an advisor to keep it abreast of developments in city markets, he added.

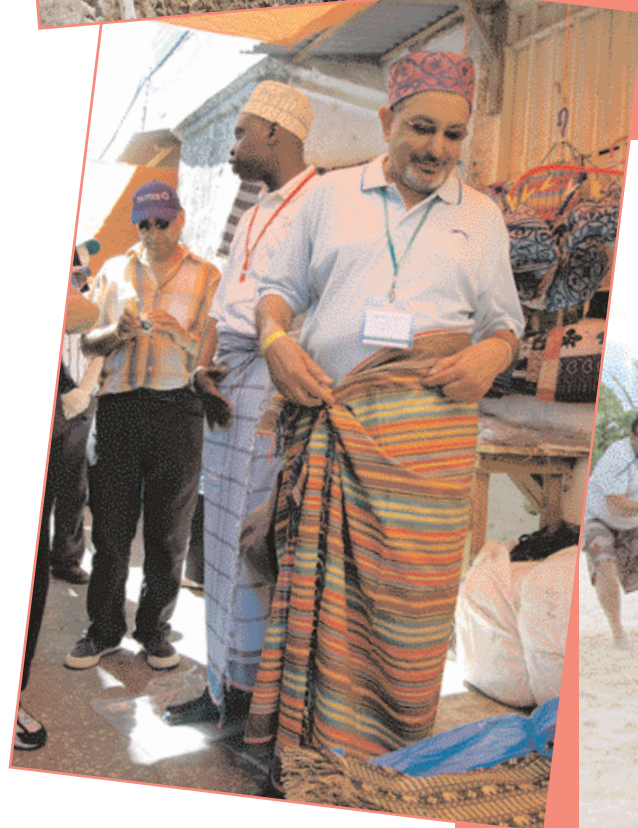
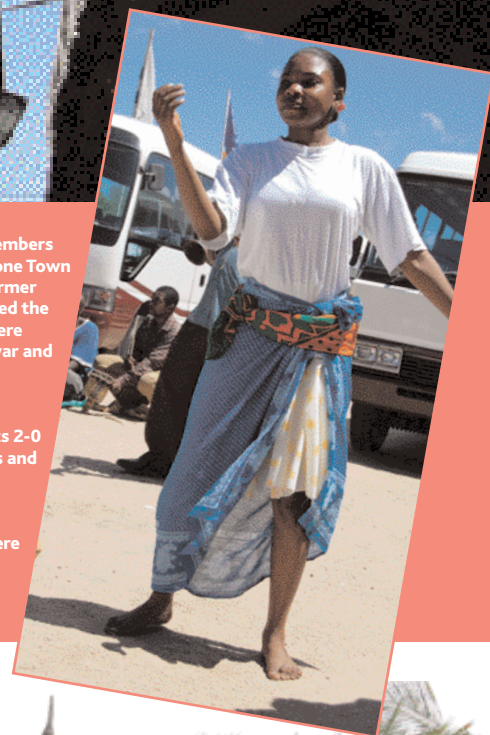
Earlier this year, the buying group attributed record profits, approaching £1.2 million net, to member loyalty, after a 15th successive year of growth.

Spice up your life...

Avicenna conference delegates proved you can mix business with pleasure on the Indian Ocean island of Zanzibar



Anti-clockwise from above: the buying group's members were treated to a tour of the Spice Island's old Stone Town where they descended into the grim pits of the former slave market and, back under the hot sun, modelled the traditional 'kikoi' scarves. Conference sponsors were soundly beaten on the sports pitch, with tug-of-war and volleyball tournaments ending 3-0 and 2-1 to the delegates respectively. It was victory to the pharmacists all round as female pharmacists triumphed over their non-pharmacist counterparts 2-0 in the tug-of-war. The piercing yells, rousing beats and stamping feet of African song and dance formed a vibrant backdrop to the long weekend. For more conference pictures, go to the C+D website: www.chemstanddruggist.co.uk/events where there are also instructions for uploading your own conference images



Stress levels soaring

» Category M highlighted as most significant worry for independent contractors

Jennifer Richardson

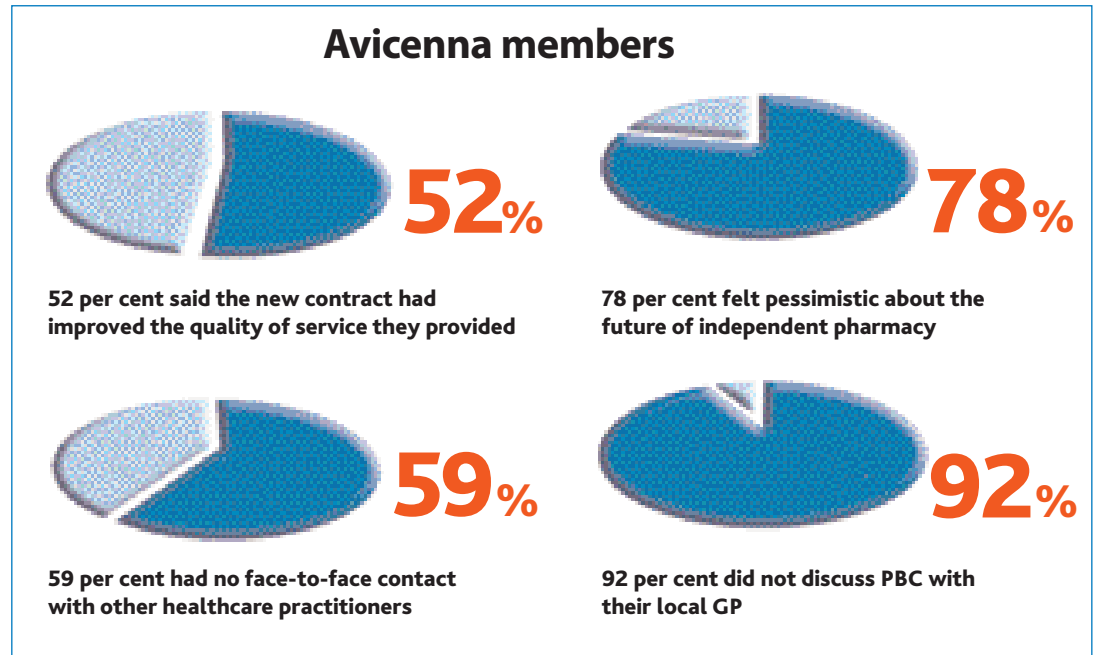
Stress among independent contractors has risen five-fold over the past year, a buying group's survey has shown.

Seventy-five per cent of Avicenna's members felt stressed, making it the third-biggest issue facing them, according to the company's annual survey. In 2007, the figure was just 13 per cent.

Avicenna chief executive Salim Jetha attributed the rise to the survey's most-cited worry – category M. "It's really hitting pharmacists very hard," he said.

Avicenna member Reverend David Croucher, of Niton Pharmacy, Isle of Wight, agreed. Though he did not feel stressed himself, he said: "The stress levels are because you don't know from one month to the next what your NHS cheque is going to be."

This view was supported by the fact that 81 per cent of the survey's 85 respondents felt pessimistic about the future profitability of



their businesses.

The buying group was exploring ways of relieving members' second-biggest concern – paperwork – Mr Jetha said.

Possibilities included training to make fuller use of PMR systems.

Avicenna's survey also indicated that just 8 per cent of members were involved in discussions with

their local GP practice over practice-based commissioning. This was "entirely in line" with the IPF's experience, said executive director David Wood.

Avicenna profits top £1 million as CEO Salim Jetha lauds member loyalty



Avicenna has attributed record profits approaching £1.2 million to member support.

In its 2007 chairman's report, the

buying group revealed a 15th successive year of growth, with net profit increasing 23 per cent to more than £1m for the first time.

Membership rose by 100 to more than 650. But chief executive Salim Jetha said the "crucial" factor was member loyalty.

"It's not just a numbers game," he said. "It depends how much support they give us."

Members will be rewarded with a total shareholder distribution of £1.75m after Avicenna made a further £820,000 available.

Mr Jetha's former chairman role has been split into a CEO position and a non-executive chairman post filled by David Gratton, a non-executive director at Avicenna for four years.

One of Mr Gratton's tasks will be to consider stock market flotation, a prospect first broached at Avicenna's 2006 annual conference.

The location of this year's Avicenna conference has changed to Zanzibar, Tanzania, due to continuing unrest in Kenya. **JR**

