

## HEALTHY SCIENCE?

Ten years ago two students from our village graduated – one with a first in Maths and another with a PhD in Oceanography. The first went off to work with a firm of accountants and ended up in a lucrative post as financial director of a national organisation, the other was offered an insecure, two year, post-doctoral post but went instead to work in IT for a big insurance company. Two good brains lost from science to the commercial sector.

Once again this summer there is concern about the trend towards fewer science A-level students, at least in England. We're losing scientists at both ends – a scientific double whammy - and the pool is getting smaller. There's a lot of hand-wringing going on about it – accusations of poor teaching, maths and science are too hard, poor pay for scientists, having to bring in scientists from abroad, university departments closing, all the fun's gone out of science.

Whatever the reason the NHS has cause to worry.

Not only does science provide a foundation for medical, dental and pharmaceutical degrees - whose graduates form the front line of the NHS, but we also have a myriad of behind the scenes professionals without whom it cannot work – the biochemists, microbiologists, epidemiologists, researchers. We continue to poach medics from other countries, who have a desperate need to build their own medical workforces.

Equally worrying is the apparent feeling amongst students that science isn't sexy. Early choices to drop science at school will surely lead to a lack of a good grounding in the scientific method amongst the general public. We all need some basic scientific understanding if we are to make sense of the rapid advances in medical, environmental and scientific research. How, otherwise, can we judge so called breakthroughs in treatments, the pros and cons of immunisation, the latest fads in dietary advice? Sadly, it is the media – often ill informed – that leads public opinion on these issues, and consequently influences policy decisions, which turn out to be ill-judged.

Public health depends on good evidence – where are the epidemiologists of the future to come from? Who is going to analyse the statistical information that should provide a basis for sound policy?

Science education is a public health issue. Somehow we must get the excitement back into science teaching. We need to nurture our maths and science students, and we need to value and reward our graduates properly.

Oh – and the good news - the PhD graduate is now an information analyst in the public health department of a PCT.

If you wish to work with the Politics of Health Group on this or any other public health issues please contact Debbie at [contact@pohg.org.uk](mailto:contact@pohg.org.uk)