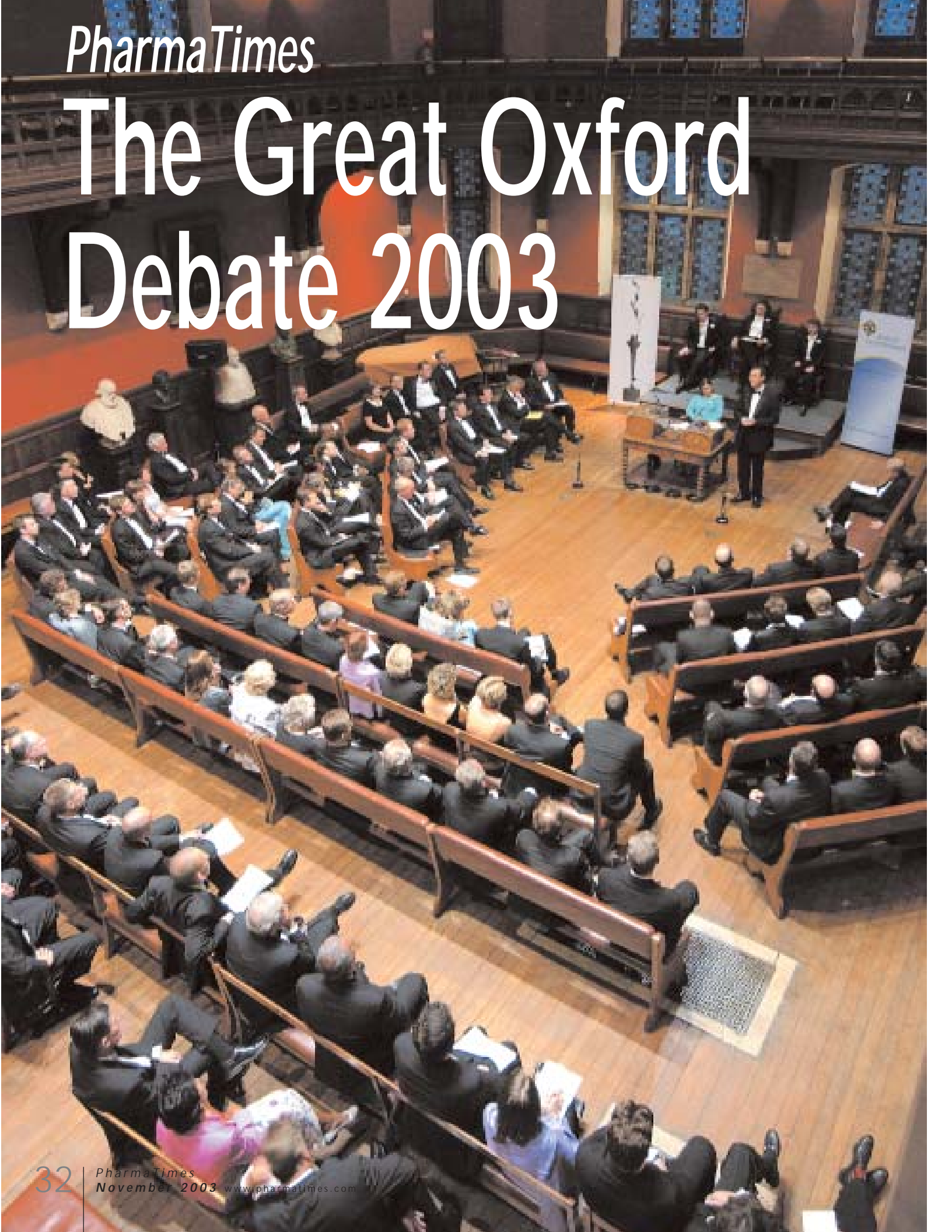


PharmaTimes

The Great Oxford Debate 2003



'Should the NHS be independent of Government?' That was the question on everyone's lips at the eleventh *PharmaTimes* Great Oxford Debate, which was sponsored by Oxford International.

In one corner of this world-renowned debating chamber, and speaking in favour of the motion, were Professor Brian Edwards, chairman of Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust, and Dr Trevor Jones, director general of the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry. Dr Jones had stepped into the breach at the last minute, following the sudden illness of Professor Alan Maynard. Standing firmly on the other side of the dispatch box – and opposing the motion – were former health minister, Lord Philip Hunt, and chief executive of University Hospital Birmingham NHS Trust, Mark Britnell.

The evening began with the customary explanation of rules of the debate by Marcus Walker, president of the union, and events then turned to Brian Edwards. He explained that there is no good reason why politicians should be in charge. There can be no denying that it is a tough job with great responsibility, but is also exciting, sexy and stimulating. However, Professor Edwards believes that most politicians wouldn't get the chance to run a company in the pharmaceutical industry. 'Like the telecoms industry,' he explained, 'healthcare is too sophisticated and too complicated to be run by politicians.' These politicians, he believes, use healthcare as a vote-winning vehicle. 'Governments haven't got longitudinal view,' he went on to say, 'they are too busy chasing headlines.' And as he concluded: 'It is time for politics to step back and let someone else move in and take charge.'

Perhaps it would be a case of third time lucky for Lord Philip Hunt, who moved to the dispatch box to speak against the motion, hav-

ing already lost on the previous two occasions he had spoken at the *PharmaTimes* Great Oxford Debate: 'Motions are usually sensible,' he began, 'rid the NHS of 'whingeing' doctors – yes! Rid the NHS of its dependence on pharma – yes! But rid it of politicians – no!' He explained that fifty years ago there was no NHS, and people had to beg to survive, before a civil servant named Beverage, created the idea of the NHS and the politician, Nye Bevan, stood up to the idea at the time of great debate and opposition. 'As long as the NHS is publicly funded, politicians will have to be involved,' explained Lord Hunt, 'not an unelected, un-accountable quango.' He went on to say: 'Professor Edwards treated us to a fantasy of an English health system free of government,' adding, 'this hasn't a cat in hell's chance of surviving.' He questioned the alternatives available: 'Do we want a sort of Rail Track running the NHS, a giant quango, or a super-NICE? Complete independence is a fantasy,' he proclaimed.

Dr Trevor Jones retaliated by commending the NHS as a 'noble and important' institution. 'I am not disputing that,' he explained,

- Professor Brian Edwards, chairman of Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust, and Dr Trevor Jones, Director General of the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry. Standing firmly on the other side of the dispatch box - and opposing the motion - were former Health Minister, Lord Philip Hunt, and Chief Executive of University Hospital Birmingham NHS Trust, Mark Britnell.



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▶ 'but I am disputing its management – this is both complex and technical, and requires skill and discipline.'

Referring back to the 'whingeing' doctors mentioned by his opposer, Lord Hunt, he proclaimed: 'They think this motion is good – 80% of 5,000 doctors surveyed by Doctors.net.uk voted in support of the motion.'

Mark Britnell then stepped up to further rally the opposition. He talked about his elderly mother who has had nine operations over the past twenty years and is currently in a neurological hospital. The cost runs to in excess of hundreds of thousands of pounds. 'She's in pain, but not having to think about re-mortgaging her home to fund healthcare,' he explained. 'Let's not be too hasty and throw the baby out with the bathwater,' he cautioned, noting that an ageing population would require greater investment in chronic disease management.

The proceedings then moved onto a customarily lively floor debate, punctuated by both light-hearted banter and serious observations on the motion. One individual, speaking in favour of the motion, likened running the NHS to holding a bird in your hands. 'Hold it too tightly and it dies, too loosely and it flies

away,' she said, before adding, 'either way, you end up with crap on your hands!' However, the best floor speaker award went to Roy Carlisle of PharmaSolutions, who harked back to the days of Labour's general election victory of 1997, when party members could be found dancing in the streets to the strains of

- Best Floor Speaker: Roy Carlisle of PharmaSolutions and President of the Oxford Union



Doctors.net.uk was delighted to support an evening dedicated to the power of excellent, communication and dialogue. It was a superb evening bringing together leaders from pharma, Government and the medical profession and illustrating the way in which these three sectors can and do work together to deliver better healthcare and innovative solutions for patients...

Neil Bacon, Chief Executive, Doctors.net.uk, sponsor of the Pharma for Outstanding Achievement.



By combining the stimulating cut and thrust of proper debate with a traditional college banquet, the Great Oxford Debate provides an event that is educational, thought-provoking and enjoyable, resulting in a truly memorable evening - the same goals we strive to achieve for our client events at Oxford International...

John Walker, Managing Director, Oxford International, main corporate sponsor.

Things can only get better. 'It's no small coincidence,' he pointed out, 'that the group that sang that song is called D:Ream! Dream on!' He also paraphrased a speech from Shakespeare's Macbeth: 'Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more: it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.' Or, As Sting sang: 'Free, free, set them free.'

The evening then turned to the presentation of the prestigious Pharma for Outstanding Achievement, which was sponsored by Doctors.net.uk. The Pharma is presented every year to the person the Industry feels has done most for pharmaceutical healthcare, and is voted for by Industry directors. This year was a closely run race between Lord Philip Hunt, Sir Tom McKillop, chief executive of AstraZeneca, and Lord David Sainsbury parliamentary under-secretary of state for science and innovation. Lord Hunt was named the ultimate winner for helping the Government/Industry relationship and his strong opposition regarding animal rights extremists.

Everyone then had the chance to cast their votes by walking through the doors marked either 'Aye' or 'Noe'. The ayes had it, winning with 55% of the vote. So the motion was held, and this House does believe that the NHS should be independent of Government. ▲



- Left: Dr Neil Bacon and winner of the Pharma for Outstanding Achievement, Lord Hunt.
Bottom left: Mark Britnell and Lord Hunt.
Bottom right: Professor Brian Edwards and Trevor Jones.
Top right: John Walker chats to a guest.

