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A MINISTER from the Department of Health stands up and begins to speak. Detailing the grave deficiencies of the medical profession and its lack of attention to evidence about effective practice, she sets out her plans for retraining surgeons in traditional practice in preference to the latest vogue for keyhole surgery.

Citing recent research, she argues that traditional methods are best and must be reintroduced. Despite outrage from surgeons, who argue that the outcomes will be poor, the common sense proposals are widely welcomed by the public and implemented by hospital managers.

Ludicrous and implausible? Maybe, but why? I ask because under successive governments, education ministers have done the precise equivalent time after time – winning not general derision but widespread support.

Take the example of early reading. The level of intervention has grown progressively over the last generation from the national curriculum, national testing, the implementation of the national literacy strategy and its various revisions, through to the current government's phonics screening test and support programme.

At each stage, the public and media have tended to welcome the government's wise attempts to tackle illiteracy in the teeth of opposition from a recalcitrant teaching profession.

Now, each of these initiatives had, at the least, admirable elements. Democracy itself has a lot going for it and politicians have often been responding to public concerns and other evidence. And let's be clear that governments of all parties have intervened.

But there is no chance that any government would make similar announcements about medical practice. So, why the difference?

The most obvious possibility is that medical practice is just too important to leave to the untrained. People would die if practice were determined by non-clinicians.

But is education really so unimportant that we wouldn't object to someone without necessary expertise determining practice? Surveys over the last 30 years have consistently shown



A Prince's Teaching Institute workshop last month saw the first principles emerge of what a Royal College of Teaching could look like. **John Coles** argues why teachers should have such a body

education to be one of the public's top concerns.

No, I think that the real reason lies in the public's deep scepticism that there is such a thing as professional educational expertise at all. Since I am clear that it exists, and that its development is the single most important thing that can be done to improve children's life chances, it seems important to understand the reason for the doubt and what can be done about it.

Let me get a couple of things out of the way. First, it is unfortunately true that schools are capable of being suckered by fads. Step forward "brain gym" and "visual, auditory, kinesthetic" learning styles – just a couple of

would soon want intervention in medicine if our ailments were ignored by doctors who claimed to know better.

But the doubts run deeper. Nothing has damaged the development of teaching more than the myth that teachers are "born, not made", yet it is easy to see how it arises. The interpersonal skills, charisma and humour that characterise great teachers are not given to everyone. But the deep subject knowledge and the skills that those teachers have in questioning technique, planning and preparing lessons, formative assessment, inspiring curiosity and creating diligent students are the hard-won product of training, study, observation and reflection,

The profession badly needs an authoritative, nationally respected Royal College of Teaching

things that swept round schools, giving many people a little enjoyment, making a few people a lot of money, but having no visible means of support in the evidence base. They are the educational equivalent of the leech in medicine – very popular for a period, but with no discernible benefit.

Second, history is not absolutely on our side. For a long time, educators resisted all outside attempts to influence the curriculum, until finally, following scandals at schools like William Tyndale, that resistance collapsed under huge public pressure. Arguing that only teachers should determine the curriculum is like saying that only doctors can decide what counts as illness. We

not a serendipitous outcome of good genes.

And while medical research appears authoritative, methodologically coherent, well-engaged with practice and clearly communicated, educational research does not. The public is confident that doctors are up-to-date with evidence-based practice, but not that teachers are.

Underlying all this is a major institutional difference. In healthcare, well-established Royal Colleges require doctors to keep their knowledge current and ensure that sound evidence is widely disseminated. Doctors do not introduce untested practice – that's the way to get struck off.

The profession badly needs an

College call: The Prince of Wales attends a Prince's Teaching Institute teachers' residential. PTI is leading the development of proposals for a Royal College of Teaching

authoritative, nationally respected Royal College of Teaching. It should set and monitor professional standards, promote professional development, oversee the development of the evidence base, require its use in practice, and speak with authority.

Government currently occupies much of this space, because nobody else does. But no government body will ever command sufficient professional confidence. That will require an institution established by the large number of teachers who wish to establish and maintain excellence in their profession.

The good news is that there is now a growing number of people who agree and are gearing up to do something about it. A large group, including leading state and independent school heads, the teaching and headteacher unions, subject associations, leading academics and learned societies were brought together last month by the Prince's Teaching Institute (PTI), to discuss the idea and consider next steps.

A great deal more thinking and work is needed, but principles are emerging. It was agreed by all present at the meeting that the work should continue, and that the PTI should continue to convene discussions and act as an honest broker in taking the next step.

It may take a generation to establish a body with the institutional strength and credibility we require. But all the more reason to start now. SecEd

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Further information

SecEd has reported on the PTI's workshop findings alongside a Teacher Development Trust debate on raising the status of the profession. For this article and links to the official PTI workshop report, visit <http://bit.ly/SvYYIT>