The beginning of the end, or the end of the beginning?

Of course you will recognise the theme for Conference 2012. Although there was some initial scepticism about the message it conveyed, I believe it was successful. You have read about the Conference in the SAPJ. What stays in my mind is Youth Day, which we used to reflect on the profession’s past, present and future.

It was very clear that the future depends on our young people (as has happened throughout the ages), and pharmacy is no exception. In particular, we heard from Walter Mbathe and Raydon Juta that young pharmacists are sure about where they want to go. Equally evident was the fact that if we want to be part of the future, we had better be prepared to go where they lead. This is somewhat of a turnaround from conventional wisdom, which suggests that the current leaders have the experience of the past to guide them.

Recently, a slightly different spin was placed on the question, “The beginning of the end, or the end of the beginning?” by a final-year pharmacy student at the University of the Western Cape. I was privileged to be a moderator for their final-year Pharmacy Practice examinations, so I went to Cape Town to moderate the oral examinations. Three lecturers examined each student for 10 minutes at a time, each asking questions about the topics that they had personally lectured. I spent my time sitting with each lecturer, in turn.

It’s a harrowing time for the students. They have no idea of what to expect. Personally, I think it’s more difficult than a written exam, because it is necessary to deliver the answers, correctly expressed, immediately. There’s no time to cogitate about the answer and come back to it later.

Although I sat in on one of the three sessions for every student, they didn’t know me and even if they did, they had no way of knowing which of the three sittings I would attend, or which questions would be asked.

One student attracted my attention right at the beginning. The examiner asked him an introductory question to put him at his ease. “How do you feel about ending your studies and going out into practice?” The student thought for a moment and then said: “A lot of students believe that our exams are the beginning of the end. And they are the beginning of the end of our student life. But I know that it’s the end of the beginning. Now my career will truly start. And now it’s up to me to make it work and to make a difference.”

I may have paraphrased it slightly. My memory isn’t as good as it used to be, but what a wonderful answer! Even if he knew that I’d be in that session, understood my connection with that phrase and planned to use it in my presence to impress me, so what? Hey! If he thought it was important enough to remember it well enough to use it in an exam, and if he applies it as he would any other knowledge that was tested in the exams, perhaps he will influence the course of the profession!

The cost of the SAPJ

It hasn’t happened much recently. In years gone by, there were frequent and heated debates about whether or not the PSSA should continue to support the SAPJ. On occasion, it was even suggested that we just could not afford the journal, so we should stop publishing it. Fortunately, in my opinion, this didn’t happen.

We entered into our joint venture with Medpharm Publications and the SAPJ blossomed. The subject of cost hasn’t been discussed for a long time, but it was raised again this year.

At our recent National Executive Committee (Exco) meeting, we discussed what it costs to produce the SAPJ at length and what is involved in bringing it to you regularly. We looked at the total cost and the fact that the SAPJ is supported by advertising which brings the expense down for us. (Thank you, advertisers. You mean a lot to the SAPJ and to the PSSA. We do appreciate your investment.)

We also examined the cost per journal and agreed that the PSSA must continue to support it. In the view of many of our members, as confirmed by an independent survey that was conducted a couple of years ago, the SAPJ is the most valuable tangible benefit to you, as a member of the PSSA. The Exco agreed and we’ll work hard to keep it that way.

The comment that took the cake? Some bright spark (an Exco member, mind you) heard what the cost of a single copy of the SAPJ is and exclaimed: “Oh, that’s cheaper than zolpidem!”

No prizes for guessing my reaction!

And on that note, I’ll leave you for the year. Have a blessed and peaceful festive season with family and friends and we’ll meet again next year: same time, same place, same procedure as last year.

Lorraine Osman