To err is human ...

Have you ever made a dispensing error? Really? Never? Never ever? In that case, I have my doubts that you are actually human! I suspect that we have all made “minor” errors. We take the wrong box off the shelf, we put the wrong label on the medicine, or we may even give it to the wrong patient. In most cases, I also suspect that we immediately realise that we’ve made the mistake and rectify it at once. It all occurs so quickly that we may not even realise that it’s happening because we’ve been trained to check and re-check until it becomes automatic.

What happens if it isn’t automatic? Again, in most cases, I suspect that it will be noticed soon after it happens, while there is still time to correct it. And as much as we may not enjoy it, nowadays we keep (or should keep) incident reports to prove how seriously we take them.

I remember one occurrence when a woman came into the pharmacy with a prescription for griseofulvin for “Mr X”. I chatted to her and dispensed the tablets. When she left the pharmacy, I happened to glance out of the window and saw that she had climbed into a car with a little boy in the back seat. I had a moment of alarm which grew into panic. I hadn’t asked her if the medicine was for her husband. I had just assumed that it was the case because she was a frequent customer in the pharmacy and the prescription was literally for Mr (initial) (surname). Her husband’s initial was the same as her son’s, so that wasn’t a clue. And of course the doctor hadn’t written the age of the patient, nor had he indicated a dosage form.

My immediate reaction was to phone the doctor next door and ask who that patient had been. My blood ran cold when I was told that it was the little boy. The dose of griseofulvin was completely inappropriate for a child of that age. I couldn’t phone the mother. The incident occurred before the days of the cell phone. I did the next best thing. I dispensed an appropriate dosage for the child and personally went to her home and waited for her to arrive so that I could explain what had happened and give her the correct medicine.

I was lucky. Very, very lucky. The story had a happy-ever-after ending and I could relax. So I stored it in the part of my brain which flashes warning lights and it’s stayed there ever since.

Is apology an admission of guilt?

I guess I’ve thought about this a lot recently because recently, I’ve encountered dispensing errors fairly frequently. Not my own. Other pharmacists’ errors. It happens at the Council’s Committee for Preliminary Investigation. And it occurs at work when we discuss Professional Indemnity Insurance.

It’s quite frightening. In 2009, the SAPJ ran an article on how to handle complaints, correct mistakes and apologise. I’ve just read it again and it is still relevant.

It’s particularly pertinent today as I have been thinking about a recent letter that I received. I haven’t published it because the matter hasn’t been completely resolved yet, but it bothers me enough to mention it to you. It’s a complicated case. The bottom line is that the pharmacist not only apologised to the patient, but when the matter was dealt with at the Pharmacy Council and a fine was levied, he paid it.

Some time later, the pharmacist received a lawyer’s letter informing him that the patient intended to sue him for a large amount of money (more than a million rand). His pharmacy had an insurance policy, which, by virtue of an extension to the public liability section, purported to provide blanket cover, as opposed to personal cover, to the pharmacy and its staff. The problem was that having submitted the matter to the insurance company, the company repudiated the claim, saying among other reasons that payments of the fine amounted to accepting liability for contravention of the law, and that this was covered by an exclusion clause in the public liability section.

It’s complicated. This is where things stand at the moment. It is being pursued by the pharmacist and his legal representative.

What does it have to do with you and me? Absolutely everything! It could be you or me in this situation. Would your professional indemnity insurance cover you? Would mine? We know that we need to be vigilant at all times. We understand that we need to prevent human error, or at least to correct it as soon as possible. We also need to read the fine print of a policy very carefully, and to ensure that we have a broker or consultant with whom we can trust our lives and our livelihood.

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