Pharmacy Council elections

Fifty pharmacists have been nominated for election to the Pharmacy Council. This is not many in the scheme of things. There are more than 12 500 on the register. It's a considerable number when you consider that only nine pharmacists will be elected.

In the past, it was relatively easy. There were four provinces, and each province was represented on Council by at least one elected pharmacist. Now there are nine provinces, each represented by pharmacists appointed by the Minister of Health. There are nine elected pharmacists. The current candidates represent all sectors of pharmacy. If you really want to, you may elect all nine pharmacists from a single province. This is not a great idea, but it is possible. Another seven people, some of them pharmacists, are also appointed by the Minister, including two pharmacists who represent academia.

And now, 50 people have been successfully nominated to stand for election. (I say “successfully nominated” because I am aware that some of the nominations were not valid for various reasons.) What does it mean that 50 pharmacists are prepared to serve on Pharmacy Council? It means that there are at least 50 pharmacists who are so enthusiastic about pharmacy, and about doing the right thing, that they are prepared to put their lives on hold for the profession. We know, there are many more quietly doing the right things in their everyday lives, but we need to congratulate those who have been nominated, and we will need to support those who are elected.

Advice to pharmacists nominated for election to Pharmacy Council

My dear friends and colleagues, I really feel the need to chat to you urgently! I have been planning to write two columns at the end of the year, the first dealing with things you may or may not (or should or should not) ask your Pharmacy Council member, and the second covering that what I have learnt during my decade-long (or long decade) tenure at Council. I thought I would be very circumspect and write both columns after I had officially left Council. But I see now that I would be failing you if I did not share at least some of my thoughts with you now, as you stand on the brink of a great adventure.

You need to prepare yourself mentally for the journey. It isn’t going to be an easy ride. There will be times when you will want to shake someone, or worse. It may be because everything will take longer than you expect it to, or it may be because you are frustrated when others don’t get the picture. My experience has taught me that Council has no choice but to move very cautiously and slowly. Even when decisions are made speedily, often they need to be approved or implemented by someone else, and this may take even longer. And if there are 25 people in the room, you can bet that there will be at least 28, or maybe more opinions, some diametrically opposed. (You must have an opinion, though. You cannot simply sit on the fence.) You learn to deal with it, and you learn to accept the fact that even if you believe that you are the lone voice of reason in the wilderness, you must support the majority decision.

Another fact of Council life is that it takes a lot of your time. More than you think it will. After all, there are eight days of Council meetings a year, so that’s manageable, isn’t it? Yes, it would be, but there are committee meetings as well. And these are the meetings at which all the work is achieved. So you can add at least another four days for each committee on which you serve. And then there are the subcommittees. I hope you have an understanding employer, and if you’re self-employed, I hope you have an unending supply of locums.

Don’t think for one moment that you can arrive at a Council meeting unprepared. There is a serious amount of reading that must be carried out. It’s not unusual to spend three hours preparing for a half-day meeting. And please, please, please make sure that you know the Pharmacy Act and the Medicines Act backwards and forwards, as well as inside out.

It’s going to be a rough ride. But it’ll be the greatest ride of your life!

Advice to pharmacists voting in the Pharmacy Council election

Vote with your head, not your heart. Yes, we enjoy some people and avoid others, because we do or don’t get on with them as people. That’s not a good enough reason when voting. Who do you know who will be dedicated and diligent? Are they also knowledgeable? Not just about their narrow sphere of practice, but also about the world of pharmacy?

When you’ve elected your Pharmacy Council members, please remember that they are not employed by the Council. The main reason that they are there is to formulate policy and to advise on legislation. They can’t force someone to answer a query quickly, nor can they resolve administrative issues. You voted for them to provide input on topics of national importance. They are answerable to the people of this country, not to their friends.

Use your vote wisely. Choose trustworthy people with insight and good judgement. Then give them the freedom and the support that they need so that they can contribute wisdom to Council. With so many wonderful pharmacists standing for election, it’s going to be an interesting election!

A little bit of wisdom

That was serious stuff, so this month I’ll leave you with something that I heard on television. Parliament was debating the use of the Waterkloof Air Force base for the Gupta wedding party. Interesting. My favourite statement came from one of the parliamentarians. He said: “We now know South Africa is as safe as a lamb in the wolf’s den. We shouldn’t fear the wolves, but the truant shepherds”. I hope our leaders in pharmacy aren’t truant.

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