A Piece of my Mind

Editorial Comment

RBL – at last!

It’s always wonderful to start a new working year with something exciting, and this year we have something brilliant!

I’m seriously excited about the Red Brick Library! Yes, the SAPJ has been available electronically on the website www.sapj.co.za for some years now. BUT ... to make it truly portable we really need a tablet app. And now we have it!

Of course, not everyone will want to use it. There are still diehard users of hardcopy journals. That’s fine, but I like having a choice. (You also know my aversion to pieces of paper. I’m convinced that, like work, they expand to fill the time and space available.)

There are also those people (usually men) who over the years have gleefully told me that they don’t want an electronic copy because they like (excuse me, ladies) to take the SAPJ to the loo with them. I don’t want to think about what this says about them, the SAPJ and what they do with it, but I’m delighted to tell them that, if they really really want to read the SAPJ there, they can now take their tablets with them. So there’s another excuse flushed away.

It still isn’t perfect because the app is only available for android and apple appliances, so I’m afraid I can’t get it on my Windows tablet, but it’s such great progress that I’m happy to share it with you at the beginning of the year.

Not such great news

The not-so-good end to last year and beginning to this year has been the community service problem experienced by so many young healthcare professionals. It was not limited to pharmacists, although obviously we know more about the pharmacists than the other professionals.

Clearly there was a breakdown in communication. Somewhere. More than one place. At this stage, it’s futile to point fingers – we have all needed to do what we could to sort it out as quickly as possible. And we need to make sure that it doesn’t happen again.

There were many factors involved, most of them that we as pharmacists could not influence. The ball is squarely in the court of the Departments of Health, both national and provincial. A shake up in the process is clearly indicated.

The bottom line is that anyone registering as a pharmacist for the first time has no choice – the law requires that person to perform community service in the public sector. No ifs or buts or maybes. It therefore must be the responsibility of the state to accommodate all applicants, particularly in light of the critical shortage of pharmacists.

Obviously there are at least two sides to a story. Nobody disputes the fact that insufficient posts had been allocated for whatever reason.

We do however need to look at another side – this is an area where we can be very useful if effective. I’m talking about educating interns as to what to do and when to do it. There is no doubt that some interns did not register for community service within the stipulated time frames. There is no doubt that some interns turned down posts because they didn’t like them. Interns need to be made aware of the consequences of both of these actions – they didn’t make it any easier for themselves, and in fact some of these were the first to complain that they had not been placed. So there’s a challenge to the regional PSSA and SAAHIP committees – help the interns to make the right decisions.

Academic interns are disadvantaged because they cannot always begin their community service at the beginning of the year. They need to understand this before they even begin their internship – it’s another decision with an unintended but clear consequence.

Although my heart bled for all the displaced young people that I have been in contact with since the end of December, I’m especially concerned about the foreign graduates. We all understand the implications of the Immigrations Act, that’s not an issue. What is an issue is that the scarcity of pharmacists should really be taken into account and they should be welcomed with open arms. The reason that I was particularly concerned about this group is that they don’t have the emotional or financial support that families may give to young South Africans. There is no family here to support them while they can’t work. It’s an invidious situation in which to find yourself.

So I thank the Provincial and National Departments of Health for doing what they did to try to resolve the crisis, but I ask them sincerely and respectfully to ensure that it won’t happen again in 2015, or ever.

Thanks from an intern

The saddest thing to me were the emails I received from interns. They poured out their hearts and their problems, and I couldn’t do a lot to help them. So I appreciated it when someone was eventually placed, and they said thank you. I won’t print their letters – they’re too personal – but I want to end with an extract from one of them.

“I’ve just been placed, and would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for all that you have done, thanks for all your efforts, thanks for responding to all my emails. You helped me when I was frustrated and didn’t know where to go.

“I pray God blesses you and your loved ones. I cannot thank you enough, will never forget what you did for me, and all other interns.

“Thanks for holding my hand through the storm.”

Lorraine Osman