Ruminations on Pharmacy Week

This month, I’m battling to get my mind, what’s left of it, around Pharmacy Week. Yes, I do know that Pharmacy Week was in September. That hasn’t changed. Yet. If you go to the PSSA Perspectives page, you’ll see why I’m living in the past, while at the same time grappling with the present, and trying to fast forward to the future.

Pharmacy Week is such an interesting phenomenon. The Department of Health started its involvement with Pharmacy Week at a time when very few patients served by the public sector had personally experienced the services that a pharmacist can offer. Medicine was primarily provided by nurses, and many patients had not seen a dispensary, let alone been into a pharmacy. If they had, it had not been to obtain medicine from the pharmacist, or to hear about it. And we all know that medicine may offer a miracle, or it may kill. The key lies in its correct use, and many patients had little or no knowledge of their rights or responsibilities with regard to medicine use.

At that stage, the focus was on educating patients about medicine, and the role that pharmacists can play in their health care. I guess that hasn’t changed, even though more people use pharmacies of all types now. In the public sector, this has partly been due to the introduction of a community service for pharmacists, and of indirectly supervised pharmacist’s assistants in primary healthcare clinics.

Back to the future

I can’t adequately thank the pharmacists who sent me reports and photographs of last year’s Pharmacy Week activities. You have no idea what an uplifting experience it was to read through your reports. Your photographs helped me to enjoy some of the excitement that you and your clients felt. It was so difficult to choose which sentences and photos to use for the SAPJ. There just wasn’t enough space in which to share more. Once again, I am totally in awe of your creativity and imagination.

It wasn’t mandatory to send me a report, so I appreciate that you took the trouble, not only to get involved in Pharmacy Week, but to document your activities and share them with me. Thank you. I can’t wait to see what you’re going to come up with in 2015. I have no doubt whatsoever that you will make a success of it.

An uncomfortable reality

However, there was a glaring omission. The reports that we published came from hospital and institutional pharmacists. That’s great. It shows that there is more patient involvement than some people realise, and that the opportunity to interact with and educate other healthcare professionals is being used fully. My question though is: “Why were there no reports from community pharmacists?”

There are so many possible answers. I can hear them in my head: “Every day is Pharmacy Day. I do this kind of thing all the time”, “I’m too busy to write”, “I don’t have the time or staff to organise activities in the pharmacy” and “I’m trying to keep my head above water, so I can’t do anything else”. The one I dread is: “Who cares?” The one I don’t want to hear is: “But no-one gave me anything with which to work. Where was the promotional material?” Why don’t I want to hear this? Because I’ve seen the evidence that there are pharmacists who can make something out of nothing. So I’m hoping that the truth is that you do these things all of the time, and you’re busy keeping your patients informed and healthy while I’m sitting at a computer trying to get my head around how to share your success with your colleagues.

Are you hearing what you need to know?

A thought occurred to me recently. It happens. It was recently discussed at the PSSA national executive committee meeting that large urban branches have an advantage over smaller rural branches. It’s so much easier to organise a meeting in an urban area. CPD meetings and discussions on important topics are routine. Attending a conference is also easier when you have the necessary support. What happens to pharmacists in other areas? This year, the PSSA has decided not to hold a national conference. Instead, a number of regional conferences will be held.

What does this have to do with the thought I had? Simple. I was wondering whether or not you had heard about the work performed by the PSSA national body. What are your thoughts on the market enquiry into private health care? What do you think about the Office of Health Standards Compliance? Are you coping with all the legislative changes? Will the proposed changes to the Good Pharmacy Practice Health Standards Compliance? Are you coping with all the legislative changes? Will the proposed changes to the Good Pharmacy Practice affect your practice? Has your PSSA branch representative told you about these issues?

The chances are that if you live in an area served by a large PSSA branch, there will have been opportunities to discuss these and other important issues. In smaller branches? Maybe not. So the regional conferences may be very useful. But if you live in Pofadder, you may have a concentrated solar power plant (hey, that’s exciting!), but are you really going to get to Kimberley for a CPD meeting? I guess not. I’m hoping you’ll write to me, even if you don’t live in Pofadder. Tell me which topics you’d like to have addressed at the regional conferences. And please let me know what your burning issues are so that we can ensure that the SAPJ and the PSSA e-newsletter can tell you what you need to know.

Lorraine Osman