Militant, restless, rudderless pharmacists

Wow! What a mouthful, and what a mindful! If you read nothing else this month, make a point of reading Susan Beukes’ contribution to the SAPJ. I’ve known Sue for many years, and she doesn’t pull any punches. She tells it as it is. And isn’t that the best way to do it? Never mind “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it!” How about “if you don’t know it’s broke, how are you going to fix it?”

Sue is obviously right about the directionless pharmacists who seem to have slipped out of the cracks. You just need to go on facebook, and you can quickly learn how unhappy they are. It doesn’t really matter whether you agree with them or not – the fact that they write the way they do, and ask the questions they do, shows that they don’t have the support and guidance they need.

Whose problem is it?

Actually, it’s yours and mine. If Johann Kruger was correct in his May column, then all pharmacists are leaders. Are they? Is each individual pharmacist reaching out to his or her colleagues to help and support them? Are they actively looking for solutions to problems? Or are they, as we all do at some stage or the other, just whinging? You tell me.

It’s also very easy to say that the associations must reach out. They must. That’s not the difficult part. It’s important to realise that an association is only as strong as its members. Being a member of the association is not intended to be a passive role. Each individual needs to take responsibility for ensuring that all the good things – the vision, the mission, the aims, the objectives, whatever you want to call them – are achieved in their daily practice.

Obviously, the leadership of the associations must take the responsibility personally. Perhaps we should write it into the requirements for all the chairpersons, secretaries and committee meetings that they should monitor social media and comment on important issues.

facebook

I take the point that Susan makes about experienced pharmacists dropping out of the group because of frustration and incredulity. I must say that I feel that way too. Part of the problem is that some of the contributors clearly have no idea of who is responsible for which decisions. For example, it’s pointless to blame the Pharmacy Council for a medical scheme’s decisions. And vice versa of course. It’s sometimes clear as well that the person complaining has done very little personally to solve the problem. While this might be because he or she feels powerless, there doesn’t appear to be evidence that the person has investigated and taken action where it may be possible to do so.

The PSSA facebook page is rather different. We have fewer members because all members of the group are vetted. Pharmacists and pharmacist’s assistants registered with the Pharmacy Council are automatically given membership when they apply. Obviously we check this. (It’s made quite difficult by the facebook names chosen by young pharmacists, but we write to them!) We made the decision some time ago that we would take all registered people, and not just PSSA members. There are some international members in the group. I know many of them personally, and I know that they are in fact pharmacists or pharmacy technicians.

The other difference is that we moderate the discussion. There are a number of us who monitor the discussion and give answers when it is necessary. We also remove offensive posts. And I don’t mean critical posts – people are welcome to voice their opinions, but some have posted unsubstantiated “research” articles while others have tried to use it for recruitment.

By the same token, we welcome the useful contribution that some members make, by sharing interesting and new information. We appreciate their questions when they are genuinely looking for answers. So thank you to those of you who contribute.

Of course, I must also mention the Young Pharmacists’ Group facebook page. Congratulations to Mariet Eksteen and her team. They make a concerted effort, and use their page to promote CPD as well as to give information.

The way forward?

One thing is abundantly clear – the professional associations must take responsibility for improving communication. At present, on a national level, the PSSA and its sectors make use of the SAPJ, the e-newsletters, the websites and the facebook pages. Regionally, some branches and sectors have their own newsletters and facebook pages, and they contribute to the website. They also have various regular CPD events.

The introduction this year of regional conferences has given an opportunity to pharmacists in those areas to speak directly to the leadership, to ask questions and to share their thoughts and frustrations. How many have taken advantage of this?

Certainly, many things of which pharmacists complain are beyond our control – nationally, we can and do write letters, seek responses and meetings, and lobby on behalf of our members, but unfortunately nothing prevents the authorities from ignoring our concerns.

We cannot take the problem lightly. If we are here to serve pharmacy, in whatever capacity, we need guidance as to what can and should be done. What would YOU suggest? Please contact your branch or sector chairman and get talking. If all else fails, write to the editor (in old-fashioned English, please) and let’s see if your colleagues can offer any assistance.

Lorraine Osman