What’s in a name – “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet”

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Sitting in a meeting for 4 days, working at giving new prospective pharmaceutical compounds, chemicals as well as biologicals, International Non-proprietary Names (INN), reminded me again of how important a name is. In this case it is about selecting or devising a name that would provide information to the prescriber and the dispenser; a name that would be linked to a mode of action through a common stem; for which there is little chance of confusion with other drug names, no trademark conflicts, and no bad or specifically good connotations in the fantasy prefix that makes up the name in conjunction with the stem.

This process reminded me of what is published about names and what was imprinted in us from a very young age – nothing is more important than a good name. Various studies have shown that the name presented with something will influence how that object is perceived – an offensive odour is perceived less offensive if presented with a positive name and vice versa (Djordjevic et al. 2008).1 Even naming our children could influence their future success in life as attractive names seem to foster high self-esteem, leading to better motivation and achievement, even higher marks because of teacher’s positive perceptions (Harari and McDavid. 1973).2

So, what does this have to do with pharmacy? In my opinion, pretty much everything, where we come from, what our current position in the healthcare environment is and what our future will be. Three or four decades ago, the pharmacist was one of the most respected and trusted professionals – being a pharmacist meant being respected. The name hasn’t changed but somehow it seems to have lost its positive connotation, the trust and respect. Many outside forces have contributed to this yes, but how much have we as pharmacist’s contributed to the erosion of this position of trust, this positive name we had? Are we always providing the best possible pharmaceutical service we can to the population of South Africa? In most cases I think we do, but then, do we get the message out that we do? A few years ago our past president, Dr Johann Kruger, in one of his messages asked whether “ethical practice is still possible in today’s world”. He came to the clear conclusion that “when you choose to become a pharmacist, you have no choice but to practise ethically.” My question today is whether we practice ethically in all instances or do we allow unethical or even illegal practices to continue because somehow we have found a less offensive name for it.

Where do our pharmacy students stand in this? During last year’s turmoil on South African campuses, it became evident that Pharmacy Schools could be targeted as it was seen as elitist by some of the other students, maybe even that our own students considered themselves superior to others. How can this be true? How could there even have been a perception like this, for people committing to a profession with the ultimate aim of serving and providing for the pharmaceutical- and healthcare of the society? Looking at definitions of ‘professional’, have we then lost the positive in that name as well? Being a professional for me still implies the same – being engaged in one of the learned professions, conforming to the technical and ethical standards of a profession; subject to strict codes of conduct enshrining rigorous ethical and moral obligations, agreed upon and maintained through widely recognised professional associations. In my mind pharmacy, as a profession, stands firm in these definitions.

The bottom line – we can’t change our names and we can’t change the name of the profession. We can however work towards having pharmacy and pharmacists once more recognised as one of the most trusted and respected professions and professionals, providing for the healthcare and specifically pharmaceutical care of all South Africans. This is also one of the premier goals of the Pharmaceutical Society of South Africa.

A rose by any other name would just not smell as sweet.

References