If you don’t feel the movement, you’re probably going nowhere – Moving forward as a team

Sarel Malan, President: PSSA

When you are in a boat and you don’t feel the movement of the water, you are probably still on dry land, and a stable boat on land is going nowhere. When you get to the water and start going somewhere, you also don’t need people who rock the boat or who drill holes in your boat. Once there are holes however, you can’t continue bailing out water, you need to plug the holes to move forward with the realisation that after each wave that you overcome, there will be others just as big or bigger to surmount.

During the last few years, pharmacy in South Africa has had to face several challenges and though all challenges can not necessarily be turned into opportunities, several valuable lessons were learned and new opportunities were embraced. The advent of dispensing doctors in the 1990’s caused a huge ripple in the whole profession, even decreasing the interest of students to study pharmacy by 50 % or more. This however led to pharmacists rethinking their role in pharmaceutical care delivery and probably contributed significantly to the increased role of pharmacists in initiating therapy for selected diseases and PCDT. Soon the situation was normalised and student numbers went back to pre-dispensing doctor numbers.

The next big wave was the pricing structure of 2004, which had a much bigger effect on pharmacy. Though student numbers have recovered and grown since then, the effect on community pharmacy and specifically independent community pharmacy is still felt. The key issue currently is however not necessarily the published fee, but rather how pharmacists are being reimbursed for services rendered. This has been, and still is, one of the key issues to be addressed in ensuring a sustainable model for community pharmacy. This is critical for the next big wave, National Health Insurance implementation, which in our opinion is just not possible without a healthy community pharmacy sector.

Much of the PSSA’s efforts in the last years have consequently focussed on Pricing Committee interaction, submissions to, and participation in, the Competition Commission’s Healthcare Inquiry, and NHI comments and submissions.

It is also vital for us to look ahead, past pricing and NHI, and to move pharmacy forward. We have to look at what is happening in pharmacy in other parts of the world, to guide and align our research, and to adapt our practice models accordingly. In Australia for example, where community pharmacies provide pharmaceutical services to the state, significant advances and additional remunerated professional services were included in the Sixth Community Pharmacy Agreement (6CPA). These are deemed critical to the future of community pharmacy in Australia and include, amongst others, various facets of medication management and medication adherence programmes – all proven to enhance healthcare and decrease healthcare spending. The CPA system could further serve as a model of community pharmacy and government working together to reach a negotiated agreement to enhance pharmaceutical care for the population.

In the UK, clinical pharmacy services have been proven to improve patient care and reduce hospital readmission rates and length of stay. It is now an integral component of medicines management.

In the South African context, we have a lot of work to do in all sectors of pharmacy and a starting point might be re-establishing trust and respect – amongst pharmacists, within sectors, amongst sectors and between the Society, government and funders. This trust needs to be rebuilt or restored from all sides. We also have to be honest with ourselves and when asking for a level playing field, accept that the very aspects or incentives that are causing the bias might be what is currently keeping many pharmacies in business.

As South Africans we have the will, knowledge and skills to overcome anything. We have to acknowledge success and be willing to listen and learn from others. Therefore, though it pains me to acknowledge this, I have to accept that the All Blacks have been the most successful rugby team in recent history and I will end this piece with something from Richie McCaw – “No person is bigger than the team. Your job is just to enhance the legacy. It’s not about being a hero. It’s about serving the team.”