What is worth a fight?

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Listening to the topics discussed during the last PSSA national exco meeting held in Pretoria during August, it suddenly dawned upon me that we often pick a fight just for the sake of doing something. I was looking at my fellow pharmacists, wondering what spurred them on in life. Is it being a good pharmacist, is it being an asset to the community, is it being there where the action is or is it a genuine calling in life that spurs them on?

The question then comes to mind: "What is worth a fight?"

As a creature sitting in the corner, all eyes and ears, it is often surprising to see what people are going on about. An example comes to mind… a complaint was lodged concerning the fact that the savings of the PSSA were being invested by an outside financial consultant, and this money was invested on the stock market. This meant that a fair amount of this money was invested in tobacco-related stocks. The basis of the complaint is that we, as a health-related industry, cannot morally support the fact that our money generates income while others might develop cancer as a result of our investment.

Do we invest in your health, or in the lack of it? Do we condone what the smoker is doing? Do we support the cancer research that is being done by the tobacco companies? Are we being good custodians of the money that is entrusted to us? Are we missing the point?

We might argue that it is all about money. We might say that we have a responsibility to look at the best way of growing the investment of the Society. We might say that it is the right thing to do. We might even say that it is the wrong thing to do. Who are we to judge?

This is the age-old rhetorical problem that faces any administrator of any form of responsibility, namely: What is the right thing to do?

Maybe there comes a time in anyone’s life when one needs to decide which road to take when the road forks. When we need to make difficult decisions, we need to set ourselves a set of rules against which we can measure our performance. What will guide me in setting my own set of rules?

Difficult questions come to mind. Examples are:

1) Do I sell the “morning after pill”?
2) Do I sell codeine?
3) Do I sell methadone?

What is the lesser of the two evils in getting to an answer? If I sell the “morning after pill”, what am I doing? Am I protecting a baby from unwanted parents or am I approving the principle of abortion? The same principle applies when asking other difficult, moral questions. Remember that opium was sold and consumed in opium bars not so long ago, and no-one thought it was wrong to partake in this social pastime.

I have been wrestling with questions like these for quite some time. No clear-cut answers have come to mind. What I have realized is that I can make a difference in someone’s life by showing respect. This is the most basic need that anyone has, namely to be seen and respected as an individual. Knowledgeable people can go on about Maslow’s theories and all other interesting or boring subjects, but we cannot escape from the fact that everyone needs and deserves to be acknowledged and respected.

Having been a retailer in Middelburg for twenty years, I have seen the drug-dependent youngsters come and go, and for the sake of sanity, I have all but given up hope for all of them, until recently… being rudely and abruptly reintroduced to a young mother that I knew as an obnoxious “druggie-client” many years ago. A familiar voice rang in my ears. I was horrified when I looked up and saw this young woman, pregnant and with 3 young children wreaking havoc in the front shop. Being presented with a prescription for 500 ml of methadone, I was stopped in my tracks.

Ethical conundrum.

At first, she remained the “druggie” I knew so well, and, was treated accordingly. I was proven wrong. Middelburg’s community-involvement made the difference that can only be described as a miracle. I decided to be part of her success story and thus granted her the respect that any rehabilitated addict deserves. She has been drug-free for nearly three years, and is committed to staying that way. We as custodians of medicine owe everyone the respect, support, acknowledgement and guidance they deserve.

So, the rhetorical question remains… ‘What is worth the fight?’

Can we as pharmacists continue to fight this moral dilemma, knowing that we will not see the end of the battle, but perhaps the next generation will reap the benefits of our fight? I encourage you to keep trying your best, investing in your community and our unique, culturally diverse society.

May God bless you all.

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