#Fees must fall

I've been thinking about education a lot recently. Not my own. Other people's. It's been impossible to ignore it. Read PSSA Perspectives to see the comment from the PSSA on the impact of delayed exams for pharmacy students.

When I left school, tertiary education was a privilege, not a right. I couldn't go to university, because the only bursary I would have got at that stage would have been for teaching, and I didn't want to go into education. (Mm. There's a moral in that story somewhere.) So I followed a different route entirely. It took ten years before I could look at studying pharmacy, and that was fine. I did get there. But it does make me sympathetic to students who have ambition but no money. And yes, something should be done for them, but what and how?

It would be wonderful to live in Utopia. Where no-one goes hungry or cold or ill, where everyone lives comfortably and happily engages in the activities that make them feel good. Where money and affordability plays no part in whether or not a child can get a good basic education, which surely is the first priority. Why are we not starting at the beginning and working eventually towards the currently unaffordable option of free tertiary education? If some wizard waves a not-so-magic wand and produces free tertiary education, will it not take funds from other urgent projects? Like improving housing and sanitation and health services? Of course it will, we all know that. I'm glad I'm not responsible for that decision making – I'd go into a deep depression that I don't think I'd be able to escape.

And if I were responsible for replacing the torched buildings and vehicles and labs and libraries and residences ... sorry, the means do not justify the end in this case. All they do is leave huge gaps that will be never be completely filled, and who will suffer in the end? The students who would have benefited from the destroyed resources.

The other missing middle

One of the things that we have heard a lot about recently, is the “missing middle”. Had you heard of it before? I must admit that I hadn't. I gather that it has been used for some time in discussions about economic development, but clearly I don't move in those circles. It makes sense when you think about the people who are too rich to benefit from social services of many types, including housing and education, but are too poor to afford to pay for them. So the people in the middle between the really wealthy and the extremely poor get squeezed out of the system.

The phrase however resonated with me after a discussion with Sarel Malan. He was talking about the staffing situation at our universities, and the fact that there is a distinct lack of pharmacy academics in the 40 to 60 year old age group. We appear to have a missing middle age group.

I thought I'd do a quick check on the age of our members. (Don't worry. I didn't check your age. I already know it.) Some of our members haven't disclosed their ages. And it isn't just the women. Today, we had 2713 members under the age of 30. Many of these are students, interns and community services pharmacists. That's logical. The next group, between the ages of 31 and 40, is 2115 pharmacists. A little less than the first group, and if you read what Sarel said about the drop in intake of pharmacy students when the dispensing fee was introduced, it makes sense.

What would you expect for the groups between 41 and 50 and between 51 and 60? Not dramatically less, would you? But it is. The first group has 1289 pharmacists and the second has 1189. And then you get those who are over 60, and there are still quite a few of us around.

What would you expect for the groups between 41 and 50 and between 51 and 60? Not dramatically less, would you? But it is. The first group has 1289 pharmacists and the second has 1189. And then you get those who are over 60, and there are still quite a few of us around. So why do we have more than double the number of members aged 40 or less than we do aged between 41 and 60? Sarel hit the nail on the head. They're not missing. We know where they are. They're living in the USA, the UK, Australia, New Zealand ... the list continues.

The result is that some facilities, like universities, have lost out on the skills and experience they need to function optimally. In other cases, succession planning is difficult – someone may have all the potential they need, and possibly even the skills, but be without suitable experience of managing complex challenges. Will we lose something of our core competence along with our institutional memory? Or will it open the doors to innovative thinking? An exciting development? You tell me!

On a more cheerful note

Seeing that I really can't keep my nose out of education, I'm seriously excited that I'm about to leave for Nanjing to attend the Global Conference on Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences Education. I expect to return revitalised and excited about the future. Let's hope we can achieve it with our limited financial and human resources.

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