



## Welcome to the profession

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When I passed my “finals” for the Diploma in Pharmacy at the end of 1961 I was immediately able to register with the South African Pharmacy Board (SAPB). My two-year apprenticeship had been completed before I embarked on the three-year fulltime academic course at a pharmacy school, so the way was clear for me to become a registered chemist and druggist (the former term for a pharmacist).

Within a few weeks of registering I received a letter dated February 7<sup>th</sup> 1962. I still have the original letter and I recently removed it from its envelope, unfolded it, and read it again after many decades of it being stored among my “papers”. I remember how important I felt the day I received it. The letter, written on personal stationery, is very short, but the words are meaningful. They are:

*Just a note of sincere congratulations on passing the Qualifying Examination and becoming registered as a Chemist and Druggist.*

*I would like you to know it is always my pleasure to have contact with my colleagues and, where the occasion arises, to assist as far as I am able in matters of our common interest whether professional or personal.*

*Best of good luck and kind regards.*

*Very truly yours,*

The letter was signed by Mr Aaron Kramer MPS. I had a vague recollection of Mr Kramer being a prominent pharmacist, a “big shot” in pharmacy circles, in those days, and because I could not remember details about him, I decided to see if I could glean some information via a Google search.

The first three or four pages on Google yielded nothing. Then something caught my eye and I clicked onto a promising site. What a surprise awaited me. I was transported back in time, far back in time, as I had access to a complete copy of the May 8 1954 issue of *The Chemist and Druggist*. In addition to the pages dedicated to news and official business, there were pages and pages of advertisements for patent medicines, toiletries, raw materials, and equipment. What a walk down memory lane.

Established in 1859, *The Chemist and Druggist* was the weekly newspaper for pharmacy and all sections of the drug, pharmaceutical and fine chemical, cosmetic, and allied industries. This particular one was Volume 161, No. 3672. The pages were numbered consecutively per volume, so the pages I was interested in were numbered 462 and 467. On page 462 was a column headed “OVERSEAS NEWS”. Under a subheading “SOUTH AFRICA”, was this news item:

“Pharmacy Secretary Retires”

“After serving as secretary of the Pharmaceutical Society of South Africa since its inauguration, Mr Aaron Kramer, Johannesburg, retired from office at the annual general meeting of the Society held in East London, April 5-8. Mr Kramer is succeeded by Mr L. Kruger, Pretoria, who has been appointed the Society’s first full-time paid secretary.”

On page 467 I found a column headed “PERSONALITIES”. Among several other personalities was this one:

“MR. AARON KRAMER, who has retired from office as secretary of the Pharmaceutical Society of South Africa (see p. 462) has left South Africa for a business trip to the Continent and the United Kingdom. The Society has delegated him to make official contact with kindred organisations in the countries he is visiting. Mr. Kramer was one of the prime movers in 1942 for a national society to take over the work of the Associated Pharmaceutical Societies of South Africa. He qualified as a chemist and druggist in Johannesburg in 1935 and has been prominently connected with the interests of every section of pharmacy. Before qualifying he was secretary and later chairman of the Transvaal Pharmaceutical Students’ Association. In 1948 Mr. Kramer was elected to the S.A. Pharmacy Board. He is a member of the Board’s executive and registration committees and represents the Board on various committees of the S.A. Bureau of Standards. He is an examiner in practical pharmacy and dispensing. From 1942 to 1947 he was a director and one of the founders of the chemists’ emergency dispensary established in Johannesburg by the Pharmaceutical Society of South Africa. In 1943 he was appointed associate editor of the South African *Pharmaceutical Journal*, a position he still occupies. He has been chairman of the editorial advisory board since 1945. Since leaving retail pharmacy in 1945, Mr. Kramer has been in the pharmaceutical manufacturing and distribution field. He is managing director of the Pharmapak Co. (Pty.), Ltd., and African Chemicals (Pty.), Ltd.”

A prominent pharmacist, indeed.

But allow me to elaborate on this. In those days the SAPB set all the pharmacy examinations using external examiners. So every student throughout the country wrote the same papers, despite attending pharmacy schools in different provinces. Those exams were demanding. The lecturers at pharmacy schools were not the examiners, so it was in their own interests for students to know as much of the content of the syllabus for each subject as possible. Some students tried “spotting” for exams but that was a form of

Russian roulette. When one passed those exams one was justifiably pleased as it was an achievement that resulted in one becoming a proud member of the pharmacy profession. Pharmacy was known as a tough course, and there was obviously no need for a pre-registration exam.

So receiving a letter from someone of the stature of Aaron Kramer made me even more proud of the fact that I was now a member of the pharmacy profession. Despite the fact that I had served on the pharmacy students' association committees, I was still in awe of the members of the Pharmaceutical Society of South Africa (PSSA) committees. But there was no hesitation on my part on joining the PSSA, as it seemed to be the natural thing to do.

The above has made me reflect on the present situation in pharmacy. I am referring to the disillusionment and apathy displayed by many pharmacists and the lack of unity in the profession. Over the past decades, the format for training to become a registered pharmacist has completely changed, and for this the government and the South African Pharmacy Council bear no small measure of responsibility. The number of universities providing courses in pharmacy has increased; where students can do their internships is controlled; one year of community service has been added to the course, and finally there is the hurdle of the pre-registration examination. How demoralizing it must be to have spent five years studying pharmacy only to be thwarted by repeatedly failing this examination. Ironically this is the only common ground connecting prospective pharmacists. They have spent four years at universities writing internal exams, spent a year doing internships in differing environments, then they all write the same preregistration exam, which could be their undoing.

I have no idea how many pharmacy students have had the experience of belonging to the profession. I was fortunate enough to have a local

pharmacist who allowed me to assist in his front shop during school holidays while in my last year of high school. I wonder also how many pharmacy students belong to the South African Pharmaceutical Students' Federation (SAPSF). How many students are mentored by pharmacists during their years of study at university? Do they have any contact with pharmacists dedicated to the profession? Are they involved with the profession while studying? Wouldn't this contact with pharmacy professionals instill some form of pride in these students who are future pharmacists?

In the June 2016 issue of the *South African Pharmaceutical Journal*, page 11 is dedicated to welcoming pharmacists who joined the PSSA in April and May 2016. Seventy-six new members are mentioned by name. Judging by the length of the columns, approximately three times that number of pharmacy students are also welcomed as members of the PSSA. Now this is a fine gesture by the PSSA, but how many pharmacists, especially newly registered pharmacists and pharmacy students read the journal?

Finally, I come back to that letter I received in 1962. Are the newly-registered pharmacists receiving some form of acknowledgement of their achievement of joining the ranks of the pharmacy profession? Wouldn't it be a breath of fresh air, an even finer gesture, if the President or the Executive Director of the PSSA could send a similar letter to all newly-registered pharmacists, welcoming them into the profession and offering them help and assistance as they embark on their careers as pharmacists?

Esprit de corps is something which is lacking in pharmacy, and perhaps a welcoming letter would go a long way to restoring this. What do you think?