When someone mentions National Health Insurance or Universal Health Access, what has your reaction been lately? Are you deeply concerned for the future of healthcare in South Africa? Are you relishing the notion of distributive justice gaining significant momentum? Or are you left cold and unimpressed by the latest announcements of changes in healthcare?

Whatever your personal convictions, or psycho-social paradigm dictating your current viewpoint, rest assured that for once, healthcare, or the absence thereof, has become a national discourse and cannot be willed or prayed away. Expert opinions abound. The Minister of Health is lauded on the first page of one newspaper, only to be crucified on pages three, four and five of another.

One thing is for certain, no one, including the Ministry of Health and its officialdom, knows what the end result is going to look like. So instead of being content to be a spectator of how your destiny unfolds, perhaps you should consider being part of the process and have a hand in your own destiny.

Consider if you will: apart from the politicians, government and healthcare providers staking claims and starting to take the first lunge in the sword fight that is so very close to happening, there are ill-informed individuals with medical scheme coverages, worried that their precautions taken against potential illness are about to vanish and there is an overwhelming majority of individuals who are not at all content with the status quo of healthcare in South Africa. Healthcare providers, including the Ministry of Health, public sector health facilities, and private healthcare providers are dealing with an angry public, whether we like it or not.

Two lecturers at MIT, one an international mediator, the other an expert in consensus building presented an approach in ‘dealing with an angry public’ a while ago in a book they jointly authored. Together, they coined a concept called the “Mutual Gains Approach”, which considers a full approach; not merely bits and pieces of a whole.

The Mutual Gains Approach consists of six steps, which are explained to be related to, and informative of the other. Together they comprise a principled approach. Abiding by some but not all of the six principles would have a high likelihood of undermining the overall effectiveness, to almost an “all, or nothing” approach. Discounting one principle for another will likely lead to actions that contradict one another and exacerbate, rather than adequately address, the public’s anger. The Mutual Gains Approach’s six interrelated steps promises a synergistic whole, where in totality the results will be more than the mere sum of its parts. These steps are shared briefly:

**Step 1: Acknowledge the concerns of the other side**

The first step would require of us to realise and understand the other side’s underlying interests. If each side involved understands and can explain the viewpoint of the other, it increases the likelihood of reaching a mutually beneficial solution. We need to consult far and wide and by the same token, we as pharmacists must allow our contenders full access to our profession, our practices and our contribution to health in South Africa.

**Step 2: Encourage joint fact finding**

The second step involves the generation of information that is believable to each side of the bargaining table. Be warned, information gathered, analysed, modelled, and carefully packaged behind closed doors, will have no credibility when it appears, even if it is accurate. We should propose that fact-finding should be pursued together, which includes gathering data, analysing it and drawing conclusions from it collectively. As such, facts presented through joint fact-finding would be perceived to be far more believable to both parties. How such joint fact finding will pan out still remains to be seen.

**Step 3: Offer conditional commitments to minimise impacts if they do occur; promise to compensate knowable but unintended impacts**

It makes more sense to minimise impacts up front when they occur, rather than to do nothing and paying a higher premium later. Up-front, conditional commitments ensure those at risk that they are “held harmless”. In other words, as pharmacists we could state up front that we support universal healthcare access, however that we do so with the proviso that legislators actively and broadly consult with pharmacy during the development thereof. Simply stated, once committed, promises must be kept. Should it not be possible to keep said promises, a conditional offer for compensation should be made available instead.

**Step 4: Accept responsibility, admit mistakes, and share power**

Oftentimes the mere act of admitting mistakes and sharing of power puts a grouping in a much more credible and therefore stronger position. It is however certainly one of the most difficult of the steps
proposed as this step requires legislators and leaders, who in many instances are influential and important people, to eat humble pie.

Power is simply the ability to get things done the way you want them done. A person or group cannot have power in isolation, as power has to be exerted or deployed on another person or group.

When considering power in its general context, it should also be stated that cognisance of, and the arriving at parity in power between two opposing parties is a key factor of a successful outcome. Parity in power alludes to the attainment of balance in power deployment. Against this background, anybody dealing with an angry public would do best to collapse their power base altogether, thereby disarming the opposing parties of the power they derive from being heroic, ethical warriors, fighting from a moral high ground.

Step 5: Act in a trustworthy fashion at all times

Trust is a crucial part in any negotiated process. Without trust, opposing parties around any negotiating table would not be able to arrive at a “win more – win more” outcome. Trust, or lack thereof, relates primarily to expectations. We should therefore shape expectations so as to inspire trust. In other words, ‘say what we mean, and mean what we say’. We should uphold the age-old maxim: Honesty is the best policy. It is important to remember when building trust that promises must not be made that cannot be kept, nor should commitments be requested of the other party if they cannot honour such commitments. Trust once lost, can never be regained.

Step 6: Focus on building long-term relationships

A simple act of harbouring long-term relationships pays off in dividends. If long-term relationships are not cherished, disgruntled customers, frustrated constituents, and an angry public will over time burn down your shop and go buy elsewhere.

At first glance, this Mutual Gains Approach seems to be straightforward and thoroughly executable. It does however become increasingly difficult as people come into play.

A Zulu proverb brings the concept of the Mutual Gains Approach home for me: “Izandla ziyagezana.” Literally it means “the hands wash each other.” Figuratively it means that people need each other to reach their goals. The reciprocal value of this adage is self-explanatory.

As we inclusively approach this very complex and difficult process before us, the way we state our position will matter more than our position. Truth be told, the public knows us. They have been trusting pharmacists since we started to serve them hundreds of years ago. If we remain true to ourselves and our profession, the South African public will support us, trust us to negotiate the best possible outcome for them and be kind to us when we make mistakes in the process.