



Beneficial side-effects?

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As pharmacists, we are expected to be knowledgeable about the side-effects of the medicines we dispense and diligent in our duty of counselling patients appropriately. In his presentation at a recent *Indaba*, a speaker used the term “*beneficial side-effects*” in recalling feedback received from a diabetic patient who, when questioned about his treatment, had said:

“*O! Ja dokter, en daai metformin ... dit gee vir my so lekker opelyf!*”

This sparked off memories of the side effects I experienced as the son of the only pharmacist in a small country town.

According to the social hierarchy of the *dorp*, the Big Five were the *Dominee*, Magistrate, Doctor, Pharmacist and school Principal (not necessarily in that order, depending on your personal regard for these community leaders).

As the son of the only *Apteker* in the *dorp*, I was certainly put under the social magnifying glass and any misdemeanor on my part soon became the latest *skandaal* of the *gemeente*. During the 50s and 60s in our *dorp*, the *Magistraat* had no children and the Doctor only had toddlers. The children of both the *Dominee* and the Principal suffered under the yolk of a strict Calvinistic upbringing and were seldom seen or heard of outside of *skool*, *kerk*, or organised school sport. My only brother was more concerned with academic achievements, always being right, and his own reputation. (He, unsurprisingly, went on to become a successful advocate.)

So, of the offspring of the Big Five, this left me in the spotlight. With my natural tendency to enjoy the outdoors and not refuse a daring challenge, I was too often spoken of as “*daai stoute seun van die Apteker*” in the local *skinder* circles of the *Tannies* of the *dorp*. Whilst I was constantly aware of the scrutiny and high expectations I was subjected to as the son of one of the Big Five, I did not let it get in the way of enjoying life, not too much anyway! The social pressure of being the local pharmacist’s son, may at times have been a restraining, negative side-effect, but I learned to live with it. On the contrary, there were far more positive, “*beneficial side-effects*” to being “*the Chemist’s boy*”.

These “*beneficial side-effects*” included having access to useful things such as string, paper, empty containers of all shapes and sizes, old cardboard boxes, and, best of all, the expertise of my father, the pharmacist.

In those days most supplies for the pharmacy were delivered in cardboard boxes railed up from SA Druggists in East London. The bigger, stronger boxes were particularly useful when flattened out and could then be used as “*walling*” for our tree house. Other uses included serving as protective “*forts*” in our “*kleilat*” battles, and being shaped into shields or body armor in our games of Robin Hood or the Three Musketeers. Such a flattened cardboard box served wonderfully as a sleigh used to slide down the smooth rock-face of the mountainside to the river below in the local “*poort*”, both cushioning our bums and protecting our shorts! Stout pieces of cardboard, cut out, secured by a bit of *bloudraad* to the bicycle frame with just the right length sticking into the wheel spokes, made a wonderful noise, instantly transforming your bicycle into a noisy moped.

Those were the days before the world became polluted with plastic bags and even Sellotape was not yet commonly used. Pharmacy parcels were made up in stout plain brown paper packets or wrapped in thick brown paper, labelled, and tied with string. I therefore had access to the large roll of brown paper and big balls of string which were the basic packaging materials in the pharmacy.

I quickly learned to make myself useful in wrapping and tying parcels and was even taught the art of tying a cork – a useful trick I could boast with when, for example, helping friends cork bottles of home-made ginger beer. In exchange for my help, my requests for lengths of string or sheets of paper for my personal use, were seldom refused. The string was of just the right thickness and strength for effectively throwing a top and, with my endless supply, I could replace it regularly when it became frayed and useless.

When it came to making kites, I was the envy of the town. While others struggled to find bits of twine and old newspapers to construct their kites, I had access to the large sheets of brown paper and balls of new string which I could “*bum*” from the pharmacy. All in all, my kites were of a superior build and could fly higher than most as I could let them out on a whole ball of string!

Ah! Pharmacy was good to me, even at that age!

During “*marble season*”, I again cashed in on my position as a son of one of the Big Five. The pharmacy was a good client of

the Standard Bank which was situated right next door. The bank provided business clients with good sturdy bags large enough to hold both the daily cash takings and the deposit book. I managed to persuade my dad to get a new bank bag and pass the old one on to me for my marble collection. So, while others struggled along with an old, smelly, used "twaksak" or dusty flour bag, I had all my marbles safely stored in a big Standard Bank bag, the top of which was securely closed with one of those thick rubber bands which I had "pinched" from the office desk in the pharmacy.

Used containers from the pharmacy were always welcome. Glass bottles with screw tops were good for storing small, left over liquids such as paint or glue from the latest school project. Empty tins from Allen&Hanburys' Jujubes and Pastilles or Strepsils Throat Lozenges were most useful for nails, screws, nuts & bolts, drawing pins, or small bicycle parts such as valves and patches. To this day, one of my valued possessions is an old Strepsils tin full of paperclips which I came across when clearing out my late father's desk.

My friends and I went through a spell of trying to trap wild birds, especially the pretty weaver birds that cleverly built their "up-side-down" nests at the end of the thin branches of the willow trees overhanging the dams. We spent endless hours setting traps with a trail of crumbs leading to a box balanced on a cleft stick to which a long length of string was tied. Theoretically the birds were supposed to be tempted by the crumbs and be lead up and under the box at which stage we (hiding quietly behind a nearby bush) would pull on the string, yank out the stick and trap the poor creature under the box. String and boxes were sourced from the pharmacy, of course!

Our limited success after long hours of sitting in the hot sun, lead us to seek easier means of entrapment. One proposal was to use a "bird stick". This was a twig covered in glue placed strategically

in a climbable tree. The hope was that a small bird would, when perched on this spot, get stuck in the glue and not be able to fly away. The challenge was to find a glue sticky enough to effect the entrapment but of the right consistency so as not to just drip off the twig.

As with so many similar problems, the one man who would know how to make this glue would be the local pharmacist, my dad! I am sure he was not taken with the idea of trapping and caging of birds, but he agreed to use his knowledge of chemistry and pharmaceutical expertise to produce the right product for our needs. (Anyway, he probably thought that such activities were keeping us out of other, more sinister mischief).

As always, the "Chemist's solution" could be relied on and we were successful, once or twice, in catching the odd "mossie" or two! So again, the *beneficial side-effect* of being the son of the local pharmacist helped me to overcome another challenge of my boyhood. But my heart had never really been in it as I had no real wish to cage any of God's creatures, so this bird-trapping phase in my life was very short-lived. After endless hours of careful waiting and watching, I had learned to appreciate the beauty of the birds, their clever innovation in building their nests, and caring concern for feeding their young. On the other hand, I had again learned to appreciate the innovation and pharmaceutical ability of the local "Chemist".

A little while later, my father was elected mayor of the town and I had to become even more circumspect in my boyhood activities as I could now be referred to as "daai stoute jong seun van die Burgermeester!" While this elevated social status brought with it a new, tougher set of social and behavioural challenges, I could not complain about the "beneficial side-effects" which I continued to enjoy as the local pharmacist's son.

Ek sê maar net!