**2011 – the year of involvement?**

I know that the year is nearly over - yes, it is, but perhaps there’s still time to make it the best year ever. We all want only the best, in our homes, in our relationships, in our careers. What can we do to make it happen? Do we leave it to chance, and to others to decide, or are we active in creating our future? And what about our professional association?

A note that was sent out for a PSSA branch AGM crossed my desk recently. It urged pharmacists to become involved, attend the AGMs and meetings, volunteer their expertise, elect strong leaders and hold them accountable. What a superb challenge.

Why does it appeal to me? We know that pharmacists need to have a united powerful voice. It’s only too evident that many pharmacists are struggling alone, when we need to stand together. We need to make a concerted effort to improve our lives by correcting wrongs and creating new opportunities. So my wish for 2011 is to echo the message of the note: please be an active participant as we face the challenges of the profession. After all, you are a valued member of the profession and I'd hate your experience and expertise to go unnoticed.

**What do locums do?**

A pharmacist friend’s daughter recently had a bad experience in a pharmacy. It happened to belong to a corporate group, but, hey – let’s not kid ourselves because it could happen anywhere.

The young woman has a prescription for chronic medication. She suffers from epilepsy and her condition has been controlled by a particular medicine, at a particular dose, for some time. As with all chronic prescriptions, she received a new prescription and presented it for dispensing. The pharmacist’s assistant who captured the details noticed that there was a difference between what the previous prescriptions said and what the new one had on it. The patient said that her doctor had told her to continue with the medication because he was satisfied with the control it achieved.

What was the pharmacist’s assistant to do? She knew that it was not within her scope of practice to speak to the prescriber. The regular pharmacist was off duty, so she asked the locum on duty to do so. However, the locum said that he would, or could not, phone the doctor. I say “would” or “could” because I am relating this third-hand. It doesn’t actually matter. It made me think about locums and the amount of responsibility they assume when on duty.

Does it happen often? I know a number of locum pharmacists who are wonderful. Anyone would be delighted to employ them. They work hard in the interests of the patient and the employer. They are competent and professional; just what we expect of a pharmacist. No wonder they are in such demand.

I also know locums who are not so great. Yes, I know that people are all the same and there will be some who are not as good as others to have around. Does that imply it’s acceptable to sit and read while a pharmacist’s assistant does all the work? I’m sure it doesn’t mean that it’s all right to be incompetent. And it does not infer that anyone can work as a pharmacist without assuming all the responsibilities that go with the job.

This was reinforced for me when looking at Pharmacy Council inspection reports. During an inspection, why does a locum on duty not know where the SOPs are kept? Surely the SOPs are given to the locum? Or do they just manage things their own way, which may be contrary to established procedure for that pharmacy? What about reference material? Is it acceptable to say that the pharmacist has access to electronic reference material, whereas the locum is unable to access it? What happens if the latter needs information urgently?

Of course, the locum may ask whether perhaps the problem lies with the responsible pharmacist, who hasn’t provided an adequate brief.

Whatever. Isn’t it time that both employer and employee take responsibility to ensure that services are of a consistently high standard?

**Modern canaries?**

I was amused by a report in *The Times* recently. The St Petersburg waterworks is putting six African snails to work, monitoring emissions from a sewage incinerator. Apparently the snails are attached to sensors that will detect if they are ill from taking in “too much bad air”.

I really need to check with my friends who work in waste destruction whether there is any serious scientific merit in this. It immediately made me think of the canaries that were used in mine shafts. The UK phased them out of the coal mines from 1986 because electronic detectors are cheaper and more effective.

Of course, being a paranoid African, I immediately jumped to the conclusion that it was xenophobia because the lives of African snails are cheap in a foreign country! I shall have to control my imagination.

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