Wow! It feels as though I’ve managed to offend everyone in one fell swoop! I do apologise. It certainly wasn’t my intention!

Last month’s SAPJ sparked a fair amount of telephonic and written communication among pharmacists. Two of these are particularly noteworthy because the reader was really unhappy with what was published. In both cases, I discussed the matter with them telephonically, but I think it’s important to apologise publicly as well. (And if you’re angry too, and I don’t know about it, I’m so sorry.)

International Pharmaceutical Federation

The first call I received was from Boet van der Merwe, who felt that I had disparaged the history of the PSSA’s interactions with International Pharmaceutical Federation (FIP). He was the first PSSA member to attend a FIP council meeting when the PSSA became a member.

I guess my mistake was not adding the word “again” when saying that the PSSA had become a member of FIP. Strangely enough, when the newsletter was sent out, no-one commented on it, so I hadn’t given it a second thought.

So I do apologise to Boet. Of course, we appreciate the work that he did, and I have no doubt that when the PSSA resigned from FIP in 1994, it was with great regret.

Feeling each other’s pain

The other person who I offended was a past president of the PSSA, Siddiq Tayob. He sent me a piece of his mind in response to the piece of my mind in last month’s journal. He felt that I sit in an ivory tower with blinkers on, and that I dismiss pharmacists on the ground. Needless to say, I have a different view. I certainly wouldn’t work for a professional society, or get involved with the things which I do, if I didn’t care about pharmacists! There are far too many other career opportunities available to pharmacists for anyone to be in a job that they hate!

But I need to reiterate, I am not a community pharmacy owner, nor do I work in a community pharmacy. My interest in community pharmacy and community pharmacists is therefore primarily professional, not financial. I certainly do not have a direct financial interest in a pharmacy.

This does not make me any less a pharmacist. And I can, and have, sympathised publicly and frequently. Last month I decided to share a situation in which I empathised with the pharmacist. There is a great difference.

So, Siddiq, I apologise if you read it as being the first time that I had thought of the practical and daunting difficulties that community pharmacists face.

No man is an island

Siddiq made another statement in his letter to me. He said, “Community pharmacy has been crying and dying, and all other ‘sectors’ and categories of pharmacists have been carrying on their existence, with not a care in the world”.

Is it true that other sectors and categories don’t have a care in the world? I personally do not believe that it is so. I interact with all sectors, and I believe that each has its own challenges, and even heartaches.

The problem is that the old saying “Perception is reality” (which has been attributed to many authors) is critically important. If something is your perception, it’s your reality. Although Dr Phil puts it differently: “There is no reality, only perception”.

And if the reality perceived by community pharmacists is that other pharmacists don’t care about them, or their problems, we’ve all failed.

In March 2003, I used an extract from John Donne’s meditation in Piece of my Mind. It’s just as relevant here:

“No man is an island, entire of itself .... any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

Let’s take it further. All pharmacists need to support their colleagues in other sectors. The working conditions in public sector pharmacies, the dire shortage of academic pharmacists, the frustration of regulatory pharmacists, the many challenges faced by community pharmacists – are they problems that we all need to solve? Are we doing so? Can we do so?

And for the Society, did we make a mistake by creating the sectors as special interest groups? Should we revert to the days when everyone was purely a member of the Society, and not of a sector? Please tell me your thoughts on this.

A final thought

Another issue raised deserves further thought and action, as the correspondence contained constructive comment on the topic of pharmacist’s assistants, and how to use them best in our changing practice environment. I’m sure that we’ll hear more about this in future.

Lorraine Osman