

in your ear



Dispensing fee for medicines

Can you believe that I nearly forgot to tell you about the latest developments in the pricing saga? As we were about to send *SAPA* off to the printers, I realised that we hadn't even mentioned the fact that the new dispensing fee for community pharmacies has been announced. It's a complex fee – thank goodness we have computers to work it out. I know that my mental arithmetic wouldn't cope with working it out for every product I dispense!

It hasn't come into effect yet – that's scheduled for 1 January 2007. The PSSA sincerely hopes that sanity will prevail before then, and that the fee will be revised.

Why do I say this? Because once again, the dispensing fee is inadequate to cover the expenses of many, if not most, pharmacies.

Effect on pharmacies

The answer to the question, "How many pharmacies will survive?" is the same as to "How long is a piece of string?" It's difficult to generalise. Obviously, there are some pharmacies that have expense structures that will cope with the new fee. There are some who will be grateful for it, because they're not earning that amount at the moment.

It's also clear that if you start a new pharmacy, you'd be wise to make sure that you keep it very modest and contain your costs. But that's very easy to say, and not so easy to do. Pharmacy is an expensive business.

The pharmacists who are worried are those who know in advance that if the fee doesn't cover their expenses, and give them some reward for their services, they will have no choice but to close their doors.

There's been a lot of talk in the media about it. You might have heard that the Pricing Committee says that an efficient pharmacy will welcome the fee. They imply that existing pharmacies can trim their costs and do away with some of their expenses.

This is not strictly true. It's not easy to negotiate rentals if you occupy space in a shopping mall. Your land-

lord will simply shrug and tell you to like it or lump it.

It's not easy to tell staff to go. They (and their families) have depended on you, sometimes for years, so how can you tell them that you have to let them go?

It's not easy to tell your customers you can't continue to offer the services that you have done for years. They've relied on you to help them with their healthcare needs.

I spoke to a pharmacist who intends to close his pharmacy. There will then be no pharmaceutical services for at least 120 km. That's a blow to the people who live in his town.

Is there a future for community pharmacy?

We certainly believe that there must be. The PSSA and its partners have communicated their findings to the Pricing Committee. If the Committee acts on this information, there's time to change the fee before it goes into operation.

What if the fee stays unchanged? All I can say is that, in the words of the Chinese blessing, we live in interesting times. I'm certain of one thing – pharmacy must survive. The people of this country need it.

What else is new?

Sorry if I sounded full of doom and gloom. I just thought it necessary to share what's happening in our lives with you.

Thank goodness there is more to life than pricing. The article on unit standards tells you that there is lots of planning for the future. Your scope of practice, and the skills you need before you can work as a pharmacist's assistant, have been under the spotlight recently.

Please remember to let us know what your thoughts on the subject are.

And a happy New Year!

As we approach the festive season, I hope that you and your loved ones will have a joyous time. Whenever and whatever your religious celebrations may be, we all start a new year on January 1. I hope that your new year will be peaceful and prosperous.

Lorraine Osman