Letter from the Editor

in your ear

In this month’s issue of SAPA, we have something slightly different for you. You will notice that we have our usual clinical articles, but we also have an article on pharmacology, which is the science that will explain to us what effect medicines will have on the body, as well as the effect that the body has on medicines.

It’s a really important science for anyone working with medicines, but as pharmacist’s assistants, you may have received little, or even no, formal training in this area. Certainly you will learn some aspects as you go along – your everyday work will guide you to what you need to know about medicines so that you can provide the best possible service to the consumers with whom you come into contact.

Is that enough? That you just pick up knowledge along the way? I don’t believe it is – sometimes the underlying science may be critical for you to understand, and sometimes even predict, what a medicine does. Not just its therapeutic effect, but also the side effects that you may expect.

Pharmacist’s assistant training for community pharmacy does include some basic information about medicines, but assistants training in hospitals very seldom get training. It is planned that for the pharmacy technician, some pharmacology training will be included in the course. That doesn’t help you right now, does it? What can you do? This article, the first in a series of articles, aims to fill the gap. If you study it carefully, it’s sure to teach you some basic information that will make it easier for you to understand what the medicine does. I hope you are going to use it, and those that follow, to improve your knowledge and understanding of medicines.

The article on headaches is also written in a way that is slightly different from our articles. Please read it, and let us know what you think of it. Was it easy to understand? Are you able to apply the information to your daily practice? We’d be very interested to hear from you.

Working outside your scope of practice

As a pharmacist’s assistant, do you work within your scope of practice? I was horrified recently to go to a large pharmacy for a prescription, and to have it dispensed by a pharmacist’s assistant without any input from the pharmacist, which was totally illegal. It was also handed over to me without a question (and it was an antibiotic to which I might have been allergic) or advice (there was also an antihistamine and a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medicine).

What could I do about it? I had no choice. I had to report the assistant to the Pharmacy Council for disciplinary action. I couldn’t just ignore it. And do you know what, Pharmacy Council receives a lot of complaints that are exactly the same.

Who is at fault? Surely it is the pharmacist who has allowed the assistant to do more than he or she should? Or isn’t it the assistant’s fault? Surely he or she should have known what is legally permissible and what isn’t?

Actually, it’s a bit of both. The pharmacists must take responsibility for not controlling the work of the pharmacist’s assistant. The pharmacist’s assistant must take responsibility for not pointing this out to the pharmacist.

Of course that brings up another problem. What if the pharmacist deliberately puts the assistant into the position where he or she is going to break the law? Take the case of where the pharmacist is not in the pharmacy, and expects the assistant to carry on as usual until the pharmacist returns. If the assistant does just that, he or she is guilty of breaking the law, and can be reported to Council for disciplinary action. Is it worth it? Can you not speak to the pharmacist, and explain that you are not prepared to break the law? And if the answer is “No!”, perhaps you must consider whether or not you have chosen your employer and your job carefully enough. You have the choice.

Lorraine Osman