in your ear

It’s often difficult for me to decide on what to write about in this column. I have my opinion about what I think you need to hear. But what if I’m wrong? What if I tell you something that you already know? Or even worse, what if there is something that I should tell you, but I don’t? And of course, perhaps I need to tell one person something, but his colleague needs completely different information.

One obvious way in which to make sure that we give you needed information is for you to write and ask us questions. They say that if one person asks a question, it’s quite likely that many others have the same question but are afraid to ask. So please remember that you are welcome to write to us.

Meeting with pharmacist’s assistants

Another way of finding out what you need is to ask you directly. This isn’t always possible, but I was recently privileged to attend the Western Cape’s Pharmacist’s Assistant conference in Cape Town.

During the conference, we held a workshop during which I observed something that seems to contradict what I said above. If one person asks a question, it’s likely that someone else in the room knows the answer! Clearly, it isn’t a contradiction because it’s likely that more than one person does not know the answer!

Scope of practice of a pharmacist’s assistant

For the workshop, pharmacist’s assistants were divided into different groups. Each group was given a different scenario. The group was required to identify whether or not a pharmacist’s assistant had acted within his or her scope of practice, and to give practical advice to the assistant.

We then discussed each scenario and whether or not the group had identified all aspects correctly. In most cases, the group was able to work out the correct answer even when it was not immediately obvious.

One important thing emerged, however. In most of the scenarios, the pharmacist did not help the assistant to make the correct decision. It could have been because the pharmacist was not near to the assistant at the time. In other cases, the pharmacist did not communicate with the assistant. Sometimes, the assistant did not know the difference between what the pharmacist’s responsibilities are and those of the assistant.

What did I learn from this experience? Each and every pharmacist’s assistant should understand what his or her scope of practice is, as well as what the pharmacist’s scope of practice is. Each and every pharmacist should understand what his or her scope of practice is, as well as what the pharmacist’s assistant’s scope of practice is.

Why is this so important? None of us must ever forget that we take legal and professional responsibility for everything we do. If there is a problem, whose responsibility is it? For example, if you select the wrong product when preparing a prescription, and the patient suffers an adverse effect, whose fault is it? Yours, for picking the product? The pharmacist’s for not checking? And if you gave the medicine to the patient without first taking it to the pharmacist to check, should the pharmacist take responsibility for your mistake? Knowing our scopes of practice will help us to work within them.

Another thing that became apparent is that we are meant to work together as a team. In a team, everyone has an allocated responsibility. If we don’t know what our responsibility is, how can we perform properly? The team may not be functional if we’re all doing what we think we should do and we’re not communicating with the other team members.

The final thing I realised was actually quite scary. I wonder if our pharmacists know the difference between your scope of practice and theirs. I have a sneaking suspicion that they sometimes forget. Please make sure that they do! If you are asked or expected to do something that you know is outside your scope of practice, bring it to the pharmacist’s attention. Tacitly, of course!

Pharmacology article

I hope that you read this month’s pharmacology article with interest. We know that the training for pharmacist’s assistants in how medicines work is sometimes not enough, and we know that you want and need to know more. Please let me know what you think of this series of articles – hopefully, they are filling a gap in your knowledge.

MCC

Something mentioned in this issue’s pharmacology article started me thinking about another matter. The article defines “Medicines Control Council” as the South African drug regulatory authority, which registers new medicines and approves their package inserts and patient information leaflets.” As a CPD exercise, I’d like you to think about this, and find out why the MCC does this. Is this all the MCC does? In other words, is its job over once a medicine has been registered? Think about it, find out about it, and how about writing to me when you’ve done so? I’d be interested in reading what you have written.

Lorraine Osman