What do health awareness days mean to you?

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Whether we listen to the radio or watch TV, or even if we read magazines or go to websites, we are constantly reminded of threats to our health, and what to do about it. In your case, what are you supposed to do about it? As a healthcare professional, you not only need to take care of your own health, but you owe it to the public you serve to be aware of current health issues, and to steer them towards solutions for their health problems.

Obviously this needs to be done within your scope of practice as a pharmacist’s assistant or pharmacy technician. You may, in fact you must, provide information that will promote health. Clearly if you or the patient identifies a need for consultation with the pharmacist or a medical practitioner, you must refer the patient to the appropriate person.

How do you prepare yourself for this important function? It’s easy – stay up to date! Go to CPD events and read SAPA – it’s your journal, after all! Ask your pharmacist – it’s in your employer’s interest to give you all the information you need.

What are you going to do with the information? Let’s look at a couple of examples and see where you fit into the picture.

World No Tobacco Day 2016

31 May was World No Tobacco Day. It’s now later in the year, but the principles remain important.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) Theme was “Get ready for plain packaging”.

―Plain packaging reduces the attractiveness of tobacco products. It kills the glamour, which is appropriate for a product that kills people,” says WHO Director-General Dr Margaret Chan. “It restricts tobacco advertising and promotion. It limits misleading packaging and labelling. And it increases the effectiveness of health warnings.”

The WHO suggests the following framework to curb tobacco use:

- Monitor tobacco use and prevention policies
- Protect people from tobacco use
- Offer help to quit tobacco use
- Warn about the dangers of tobacco
- Enforce bans on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship
- Raise taxes on tobacco

Clearly the point that jumps out at us as healthcare professionals is the bullet saying “Offer to help to quit tobacco use”.

This year, the PSSA participated in World No Tobacco day by sending out a media release on kicking the habit. (Read it below this article.) It does speak about the pharmacist, but clearly the pharmacist’s assistant can and should be involved as well. After all, there are aids to smoking cessation that are sold in pharmacies, most of which do not require a prescription and may therefore be sold by pharmacist’s assistants. These are preparations, which may be transdermal patches, gum...
or lozenges that contain low doses of nicotine. There are prescription only medicines, but you need to be familiar with the products that you may sell within your scope of practice.

**What about elderly people?**

In May and June, there is a health campaign to identify and assist elderly people with their health. What can you do? Pharmacist's assistants may sell many painkillers. Be vigilant — if you notice that an elderly person is buying a lot of painkillers, refer them to the pharmacist. If it contains aspirin, the person may be at risk of ulcers. If they take too much paracetamol, it may damage their already aging liver. The same thing applies to laxatives — what if there is an underlying illness that needs medical treatment.

**Pharmacist’s assistants and the environment?**

What about World Environment Day in June? What could you do there? Perhaps you could speak to consumers about safe disposal of unwanted and expired medicine. If your pharmacy accepts returned medicines for disposal, you could remind consumers to bring their unwanted medicines to the pharmacy.

**Drug awareness week**

At the end of June, there is an opportunity to remind people of the dangers of taking medicines that may have habit forming potential. A lot has been done recently with codeine-containing products. Did you know that on 3 June 2016 the requirements for sale of codeine products changed? In order to sell it as a schedule 2 product, the maximum amount of codeine permitted per dosage unit is 10 mg, and the codeine must be combined with another therapeutically active substance, such as another painkiller or an antihistamine. The pack may contain only enough dosage units for a maximum treatment period of 5 days, and the maximum daily dose must not be more than 80 mg of codeine. You are also limited to selling one pack only per customer.

Why has the Medicines Control Council done this? Obviously people have been taking too much codeine, and not necessarily for medical reasons. Think about the new requirements. Don’t they make sense? If your pain is so bad that it needs more than 80 mg of codeine a day, or if you are still in pain after five days, surely you need to go and see a doctor?

**The pharmacist's assistant, an untapped resource?**

We all have different reasons for getting involved in health care, but what we do once we are there is very similar. You are working in a pharmacy, whether it is a community or hospital pharmacy or a primary healthcare clinic, and your job is to make sure that patients not only get their medicines, but also that they are advised on issues that affect their health. Make sure that you know what these issues are, and what you can say to people who need to know about them too.

**Media release – Kick the habit on World No Tobacco Day**

If you’re a smoker and you’ve been thinking about quitting, how about choosing World No Tobacco Day on 31 May as the start of your cigarette-free life? It’s one of the best things you can do for your health and for those around you who may be exposed to your harmful second-hand smoke. And if you’re a smoker who’s on the fence about whether to give up your pack-a-day habit, take a long hard look at these figures from cansa.org.za:

- 44 000 South Africans die from tobacco-related diseases each year
- 6 million people worldwide die from tobacco-related diseases annually
- 600 000 non-smokers are killed by exposure to second-hand smoke each year

Then consider the fact that using tobacco increases your risk of cancer of the lungs, oesophagus, mouth, stomach and more.

**Need some help to quit?**

If you’ve decided that enough is enough, it’s a good idea to draw up an action plan that includes the date you’ll be quitting, the methods you’ll be using, and any milestones you’d like to reach along the way. There are many ways to quit and options available to help you stay the course. These include:

- Going cold turkey
- Behavioural therapy
- Gradually cutting back your cigarette consumption

There are also nicotine replacements and medications available, and you may want consult your pharmacist about including these in your action plan.

**Nicotine replacements**

These gums, patches, lozenges and sprays provide you with small amounts of nicotine to help reduce cravings and alleviate withdrawal symptoms, with the ultimate goal of weaning you off nicotine altogether.

**Medications**

There are certain prescription medications available to help you quit smoking, so speak to your pharmacist about referral to your doctor if these are an option for you.

**How your pharmacist can help**

Chat to your pharmacist for advice about creating a quit-smoking plan and about over the counter options that may be helpful to you. If your doctor prescribes medication, your pharmacist will be able to confirm the correct dosage, advise when it should be taken, and answer any questions you may have about side effects or medicine interactions.