

A Word in your ear



Pharmacist's assistant training under the spotlight

One of the Ministry of Health's priorities is human resources. All aspects are currently being examined, particularly how to train and keep health care workers.

Pharmacist's assistants are obviously important in the provision of pharmaceutical services, but a number of shortcomings have been identified in their training.

It sounds like Goldilocks and the Three Bears – either they're over-trained for things they don't do, or they're under-trained for things they do, and the rare assistant is trained in a way that is ideal for her job.

Pharmacy Council will be looking at training, so if you have any ideas on how assistants should be trained, please send your comments to me.

Another matter that will receive attention is the fact that, at present, we have two categories of assistant – basic and post basic. On one hand, we have people saying that we only need one category, i.e. post basic, because promotion in the public sector is hampered by the two categories. On the other, we have people saying that we actually need a third category because pharmacist's assistants working under indirect supervision require additional skills and knowledge.

The problem with career paths (or lack thereof) also needs to be addressed. Why become a pharmacist's assistant if you're going nowhere in your job?

Something that has got lost in recent years is the initial discussion that part of the career path planning should include the option to be admitted to the pharmacy course offered by the universities. It may be necessary to include a bridging year, particularly for pharmacist's assistants who didn't have maths, science or biology as matric subjects, but why shouldn't those people who have intimate knowledge of pharmacy at least be given the opportunity to pursue it further? Let me know your thoughts on this, too.

Are you obeying the law?

This month's *SAPA* carries a letter from a disillusioned pharmacist's assistant. A number of important issues are raised. Obviously, the lack of appreciation is critical. Salaries are generally considered to be negotiable between employer and employee, and many pharmacists are saying that the pricing issues have made it impossible for them to pay staff. Whatever the reasons, salaries are important to all of us. Quite apart from the fact that we need money to survive, we often feel that our salary reflects our employer's appreciation of us – if we're not well paid, we feel that it means that our employer doesn't appreciate us. No wonder the writer of the letter is disillusioned.

Another matter which is of serious concern is what the writer says about working without any supervision. Apart from assistants working (legally) under indirect supervision (and there aren't too many of those), pharmacist's assistants must work under direct supervision of a pharmacist. What happens if they don't? In a recent Pharmacy Council disciplinary hearing, both the pharmacist and the assistant were found to be guilty of breaking the law, and both were punished.

It may seem harsh. Why punish the assistant if the boss doesn't do his job? The reason for this is that the pharmacist's assistant is registered with Pharmacy Council, and is therefore personally responsible for his or her own actions, and must make sure that all laws are obeyed. It's hard.

The Pharmacy Council's Committee for Preliminary Investigation has recently had a number of cases, involving just this topic, referred to it. In all cases, both the pharmacist and the assistant are required to explain what happened, and, so far, both have been required to pay an admission of guilt fine or be referred to the Committee for Informal Inquiry.

What do you do? Some assistants have said that they're terrified to refuse to do what is expected of them – they may be fired for insubordination. In the long run, though, is it worth selling your soul for someone else's benefit?

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