Appreciate your Pharmacist’s Assistants

Aleta Wege

I hail from a pre-assistant era, when pharmacists were the sole occupants of the dispensary counter. We were perceived to be Kings of the Castle. We had our pharmacy assistants that served our front shop customers, sold perfumes and ordered and received stock. It was the pharmacists or the Appie (short for apprentice, now the pharmacist intern) who had to pack away the scheduled stock, who had to dispense the medicine and counsel the patients.

Then there were the wonderful university holidays. You had a pharmacy student working during the holidays who had to do all those less liked tasks. In the early days of my career we did weekly manual submission of medical aid claims to the checking office. When I was a student we still did manual dispensing – calculating the price of each item on the script and typing the medicine labels on a typewriter! It was only later that computerised dispensing was introduced. We also did not do community service.

Then came the pharmacist’s assistants. Many an individual who had been working in the dispensary for years was now allowed to register as a pharmacist’s assistant, based on their years of experience.

And the era of the new generation pharmacist’s assistants has now dawned. It was around 1979/1980 that the pharmacist’s assistant course came into existence. We were unsure of what the role of the assistants would be, but the law now stated that only registered individuals were allowed to work in the dispensary. We actually had no choice but to adapt or be left behind.

Today we cannot exist without the pharmacist’s assistants. When I look back over the years, I can see how the role and responsibilities of the pharmacist’s assistants has evolved and expanded. Today they are an integral part of any pharmacy staff complement. There is no hierarchy or differentiation between pharmacists, assistants and learners in our pharmacy, which is in a public sector hospital. Each one is an important member of the team; each person knows his or her responsibilities and works within his or her scope of practice; each person is important to the optimal functioning of the team. In our pharmacy we are 6 pharmacists, 4 assistants and 3 learners.

It is so convenient and important to have the pharmacist’s assistants on your staff. They have their designated tasks: Stock is ordered, received, checked and FEFO-FIFO packed away. Stock on shelves is replenished. Out-of-stock items are sourced from other facilities and collection of these items is arranged. The stock is there when we need it. The preparation for StockTake gets done – cycle counts, pack size corrections, expired stock removed, dormant and short dated stock redistributed to other facilities.

The wards are visited and members of nursing staff are trained regarding stock control and minimum and maximum levels of stock required in the wards. The assistants ensure that the nursing staff knows how to pack the ward fridges and return unused stock once the patient is discharged. Previously hoarding of stock was common, but this is no
longer a problem. The pharmacist’s assistants and learners have taken ownership of ward stock control. They have a mandate to address wasteful ordering and hoarding of stock. I am so proud of my assistants and learners when they tell me that they have to go to the ward to speak to the sister because the ward is over-ordering. They are so familiar with their wards that they pick up immediately if the order deviates from the familiar ordering pattern.

The assistants are better clued up with regards to waste management than some pharmacists. Waste management is done according to the SOP – pharmaceutical waste is separated into solids, tablets and sharps. When the service provider arrives to collect the waste the assistants ensure that the bins are sealed and weighed. No waste leaves the pharmacy without a duly completed upliftment receipt from the service provider.

On the days the learners have to attend class we now have to fill the gaps. And oh my word, when the pharmacist’s assistants go on leave we have to reorganise the workflow in the pharmacy! When the stock master is on leave, one of the pharmacists has to take over that responsibility, as the other assistants have their own responsibilities to take care of. And once again this period of adaptation needs to be bridged.

When the 3rd year students from the University of Western Cape School of Pharmacy work with us for the two weeks Service Learning In Pharmacy (SLIP) programme rotation, it is the assistants that take the students under their wings and teach the students about waste management, stock control, ordering of vacoliters, ward stock issues and control of stock in the wards. Together with the pharmacists, the assistants teach them how to dispense and label medicine, to record all Section 21 drugs dispensed in the register. The pharmacist’s assistants enjoy having the students around and gladly share their knowledge and experience with the students.

I cannot imagine the pharmacy profession without pharmacist’s assistants. The pharmacists, assistant and learners work shoulder-to-shoulder on those crazy days when you think that this is the day that the stream of patients is never going to stop and that you are never going home. Together we put our heads down and focus on the tasks at hand.

How did we ever survive without you?