The manufacture of pharmaceutical products in South Africa (not bulk re-packing) has been on the decline over the last 20 years. This is despite endorsement of local pharmaceutical manufacture in the National Drug Policy. Studies such as ‘the Fridge report’ and ‘Genesis Analytics’ say what, but little on the how and who.

Globalisation and economies of scale have been touted as reasons for companies closing down local manufacturing operations and not upgrading their technology base.

With the advent of PIC/S, the technology gap between ourselves in South Africa and manufacturing leaders has become more evident. Skills within the industry have not kept pace with international trends and compliance to international best practice. A reversal of this trend is key to South Africa’s becoming self sufficient in at the very least ‘Essential Drug List’ supply.

Newspaper advertisements for key posts in industry have shown the need for critical skills in the areas of validation, quality process control and sterile manufacture. Without intellectual capital or the transfer of knowledge, little investment of consequence will result.

There is thus opportunity for all in academia and manufacturing companies, as well as individual ‘pharmaceutical sciences’ practitioners, to recreate and enhance this strategic resource, ensuring local self-sufficiency. Doing business in the healthcare environment in South Africa requires new ways of thinking. The protectionist attitude cannot prevail. Innovative minds have been able to realise sustainable profits despite perceived legislative hardships.

There is much opportunity in the area of skills transfer. Progressive multinationals would do well to take a leaf out of Oprah Winfrey’s book – teaching the fishermen and not just providing the fish.

The Health Charter will become a reality. Within this, both local and foreign enterprise can create value with new ideas on skills enhancement, job creation and transformation.

As an industry, we need to leapfrog beyond what PIC/S currently states as the minimum for compliance. Technology as it is today is often obsolete before it hits the market place. Is it not time for a specialised institution to house and protect and grow the intellectual capital of our medicine chest?

South Africa has a proud manufacturing history. We were one of the first countries to manufacture intravenous fluids licensed from American technologies in the late 1940’s. We once had a penicillin plant outside Durban – certainly one of the few outside of the US and Europe. Active pharmaceutical ingredients were made just outside Pretoria at Noristan, and were made in Cape Town and other centres.

The key ingredient in the success of all these activities was people. If we wish to provide a sustainable health care system providing locally manufactured quality medicines, investment in intellectual capital is a prerequisite. Innovation, entrepreneurship, creativity and passion are all key to our realising a better life for all.

With government providing the economic and political springboard, now is the time for us to seize this opportunity.

Local is not only lekker – it is essential!

James Meakings