Last year, the City of Tshwane pharmaceutical services embarked on yet another great and successful Pharmacy Week campaign. The theme for the campaign was “Ask your pharmacist about the safe disposal of unwanted and old medicines – knowledge is powerful medicine”.

Encouraging team work
Traditionally, Pharmacy Week is promoted at health care facilities for the patients who visit those facilities. Our management had put forward a challenge to the staff to do something different – take the Pharmacy Week campaign to the community and don’t wait for the community to come to the facilities. Management came up with a competition idea, with a sponsored floating trophy. This was done to ensure that teams set up to participate in Pharmacy Week were excited and committed to the campaign.

Five teams of pharmacists and pharmacist’s assistants were put together. Post Basic Pharmacist’s Assistants planned everything for their different areas and ran the campaign under the leadership of pharmacists. There were criteria set by management, which included the team with the most unique idea, reaching out to a larger community, corporate identity, team work, staying within the theme and consistency. Teams were expected to go all out and make the campaign a success.

Filling the gap
Activities of the teams included presentations at different primary health care facilities, old age homes, a shelter for mentally ill patients and a shelter for asylum seekers. The message which was communicated at all areas during the campaign was the correct use, storage and disposal of medicines, with the emphasis that people should bring back their old and unwanted medicines to the clinics for safe disposal. What emerged from some of the interventions was that there is still a big gap in the knowledge of handling of medicines. People are hungry for knowledge and need pharmacists and pharmacist’s assistants to engage in outreach programmes and educate them.

Asking the right questions
One of the teams went all out to do a door to door campaign at Atteridgeville Township. This Township is comprised of low cost houses, RDP houses and squatter camps. The team had designed a questionnaire to survey the community during the campaign.

Questions asked included:
- Are there medicines in the house?
- Are medicines stored correctly?
- Are the medicines still usable?
- Are there clear directions on the labels?
- Do people know how to take these medicines?
- Can sources of medicines be identified?
- What does the community do with expired and unwanted medicines?

The outcome of the survey showed that more than 80% of the households had medicines. Some of these medicines were not stored correctly – they were stored on window sills, in kitchens next to stoves and some in bathrooms. Medicines dispensed by some public health care facilities were not labelled at all. People are throwing old, expired and unwanted medicines in the rubbish bins and drains. There was one particular woman who had 8 packets of Simvastatin that she says were given to her even though she indicated to the doctor and the dispenser that she does not need them – this shows that there is still indiscriminate prescribing and/or dispensing of medicines.

Giving the right answers
The community was encouraged to ensure that at all times they understand everything about their medicines before they leave a health care facility. They were taught about the correct storage of medicines at home. The team had medicine disposal bags, in which they would take all medicines that were no longer useful from the houses. The community was encouraged to bring their old and unwanted medicines to the health care facilities for safe disposal every time that they visit the facility.

A shocking exposé
During the door to door campaign, a community member complained to one of the team members. She claimed that the team was giving the community contradictory information, because the clinic was “dumping” medicine in the bush just around the corner. She indicated that the dumping site is very close to the clinic and is on the walking path between an informal settlement and a school. This member of the community was then requested to accompany our pharmacist’s assistant, together with the rest of the team, to the dumping site.

Wow, what an exposé! There was indeed a dumping site, very close to the clinic as she had alluded. It was on the walking path where school children were passing through every day. The site posed a danger to the school children
and the community as a whole. This was an act of ignorance and lack of knowledge by the person who did it.

Illegal or counterfeit?
What was found on the dumping site was scary. There were a lot of tablets, capsules and sharps containers. Most of the medicines were packed in transparent packets, some of which had been opened. This showed that, in all likelihood, community members had already taken some of the medicines. Some medicines found on the site were well known, e.g. Flagyl and Losec.

The label information was written in non-South African English. Although some of the items are available in South Africa, the indications and dosages were different from the South African ones, e.g. Promethazine 25mg, 1 tablet every six hours for vomiting. One of the package inserts had the item registered for use only in the USA, and some of the containers indicated this too. This made the team suspect that medicines might be imported illegally into our country.

Who’s going to do something about it?
The matter was then reported to a SAPS van which was passing by. The police did not do anything about it – they left without even going to the site. The matter was also reported to the Disaster Management and Environmental Health Departments. The team waited for several hours for the representatives from these, to no avail. They then decided to pick up everything that was on the site, to avoid further use by the community. The matter was also reported to the Medicines Control Council, who confiscated everything, and the Law Enforcement Department is currently investigating the case.

The buck stops here
This was an eye opening discovery indeed. The community is still ignorant on the dangers that medicines can pose to the lives of people, in particular the children. The community needs education on the safe disposal of medicines. All health care professionals (public and private sector), and especially pharmacists, have a responsibility to educate the community about the correct use and safe disposal of medicines.