What distinguishes a profession from a job? Should there be loyalty towards your profession? Is pharmacy as a career turning out to be just another 8 to 5 job?

A key characteristic of a profession is that it requires specific training that delivers a specific skill or qualification that entitles only that trained person to perform that job. There is legal protection for the person performing that job because only that trained person is entitled to do that job. But there is more to it than that – it also implies a calling or vocation and a certain dedication to one’s daily job or career. Is that still the case or have we been swindled out of the professional title of a calling?

The earliest “pharmacists” were the monks in the monasteries who experimented with different herbs and plants in order to find a cure for the ill and they certainly had a vocation for what they were doing. That supposedly led to the deduction that pharmacy is a profession from the point of view that, apart from the training, it is also a calling. There is an altruistic component to being a pharmacist in that, apart from the fact that you receive remuneration for your services and products, you also experience a sense of well-being after alleviating a patient’s excruciating pain or whatever other illness he or she was suffering from.

Another facet of professionalism that the pharmacist cannot get away from is the fact that you don’t lock a profession behind your five o’clock office door till the next morning. It follows you, to the braaivleis with friends, to the sport arena, to your holiday destination, for wherever you are, if someone hears that you are a pharmacist, you will inevitably be asked “I have this little white pill...” or “what can I take for my...” You cannot escape it and you should not want to escape it! For you are regarded as an expert and a professional in that regard.

That brings us to our current situation – are we still a profession from the calling point of view and do we need to have a certain sense of loyalty towards the profession? Corporatism has certainly brought about a change in our outlook towards the profession and a new breed of community pharmacists has started their training with the sole outlook of not wanting to own their own stores, but to carve out a career in the corporate world. Does that change the feeling about one’s profession? It shouldn’t and the feeling of having a shared responsibility for the image that the public has of you as a member of the pharmacy profession should weigh equally as heavy on you as on any other pharmacist, each in his or her own sector of the profession.

The question that remains unanswered is whether you should experience a certain “esprit de corps” with your colleagues, should you be loyal in defending your profession and should you experience a universal pride in what you are doing?

Being an academically challenging course it certainly puts you as a pharmacist amongst a list of achievers, so yes, that is something you can be proud of and therefore the calling for the “esprit de corps” is not uncalled for. Pharmacists have over the centuries proved to be cornerstones of the public’s trust and held high in regard, so again, yes, there is a heritage of pride to uphold and defend, especially if unfair criticism is expressed over the profession that you are part of. I mentioned the feeling of altruism and again there is room for pride in what you are doing, it is so more than just a fee for a service that you are delivering.

In conclusion, I fail to convince myself that there should not be a feeling of loyalty towards my profession! You should be proud to belong to such a noble profession and should do your utmost to uphold the standards that your peers have set over the ages! Pharmacists should behave as professionals in their ethical behaviour, in their daily actions, in the way they dress, speak, and treat patients, colleagues and associated professions. It is what you chose to be – so live it and defend it!