My pharmacist: the internet

Back in the days, when standing in a retail pharmacy still made up quite a percentage of my monthly working hours, the one thing that used to irritate me most was the patient, or rather client in this case, trying to teach or convince me that this new ‘all natural remedy’ she had read about in Huisgenoot would actually work much better for her cough than the empirically tried and tested cough syrup that I was suggesting – this of course, only after he/she had asked me for advice and medicine to relieve ‘this nagging cough’. A further frustration was that in many cases, ‘good’ supplements, which I as a pharmacist would have liked to know more about, were advertised to the public in popular magazines at least a month before the manufacturers deemed it necessary to inform pharmacies about it.

That was then, and many pharmacists are probably looking back at it as part of the good old days. Today, I’m told, they walk into the pharmacy with or without printed evidence, having Googled their symptoms, selected their disease from the list of probabilities and are ready to tell the pharmacist what they really need to cure them. A complicating factor is that in many instances they might even be right! So, how do you handle it? Feel redundant and make your R16 on the sale? Hopefully our profession has not been degraded or eroded to this level as we can be confident that as pharmacists in South Africa, we still have the background of one of the best training programmes in the world. I think that these scenarios provide the perfect opportunity for discussion and patient healthcare education. What better opportunity will you get than to acknowledge the correct information, or negate the wrong or incomplete information, discuss the benefits of all the available information and highlight the dangers of this knowledge in unqualified hands.

What I earlier saw as a problem has now actually developed into an opportunity, one where we as pharmacists can now increase our role as healthcare educators. All we need to do is to stay abreast of new developments – in medicine and information technology – and take charge of the information available.