If pharmacy is well, the nation is well. Perhaps, this is a rather controversial statement with which to begin an article, but after returning from the International Pharmaceutical Federation (FIP) Conference, I think that this could well be true. The theme of the conference was: “Improving health through responsible medicine use”. This implies that pharmacists’ roles are expanding to include striving for health as an outcome. In other words, your professional duty does not stop at correct medicine dispensing.

A number of years ago, Charles Hepler (who was honoured by FIP this year) and Linda Strand had already recognised this when they formulated the principle of pharmaceutical care. This year, it was expanded upon by examining the value-added role of pharmacists. A number of presentations were delivered by different departments of pharmacy practice which investigated different aspects of this principle.

According to the World Health Organization, between 30% and 50% of medicines that are prescribed for chronic diseases are not taken as directed. Non-adherence to medicine regimens costs the pharmaceutical industry billions every year and leads to disease escalation and deaths. But pharmacists can help. Not only are we present at the point of distribution, but patients trust us and are eager for our direction and advice.

Other aspects that were covered at the conference included:

- The healthcare team of the future: Working with other healthcare providers
- The value of the pharmacist
- Medicines of the future: From nanomedicines, to biowave monographs, to new medicines of the future
- Safe medicines, safe patients: Pharmacovigilance and adverse event reporting
- Ensuring responsible medicine use: Access to medicine, medicine information and clinical guidelines
- The future medicines supply chain
- The future of the healthcare economy: Will we shape it or will it shape itself?
- Adherence: Helping patients to take their medicines properly

All the topics were very interesting, topical and relevant. Exposure to our international peers has opened up a window of opportunity for us. Benchmarking our industry in the international arena is of immense value, and we plan to contribute more in the future now that we are once again fully fledged members of FIP.

Possible projects that could be showcased are our Codeine Care project and the Drugwise book as a start. Other ideas are welcome. We certainly have much to show the world with regard to what is happening in South Africa in pharmacy today. I was proud to be a South African pharmacist!

South Africa was also a co-signatory of the centennial declaration of “improving global healthcare by closing gaps in the development, distribution and responsible use of medicine”.

The training of pharmacists was debated when the question of core competencies was challenged by academics, versus the argument that there should be core curricula. It was an interesting debate. Each argument had its own strengths and weaknesses.

Comparative situations within the South African scenario were debated, with feuding between pharmacy law and competition law. Pharmacy care and the future of sustainable healthcare were discussed with the global workforce in mind. The future of the profession was debated and different scenarios examined. Lastly, increased legal, social and professional liability has served as warning of what pharmacists can expect in the future.

This is a brief report on the activities that took place, as there are too many sessions to attend and many sessions that ran in parallel were repeated. The conference is too vast for everything that goes on there to be absorbed!

It has given me new inspiration and hope for the future of our profession. Pharmacy is extremely dynamic and forever changing. This is positive as change brings innovation and innovation ensures the future.

What we should never forget is that, every day, the image of the profession is portrayed by pharmacists in our dealings with our patients, fellow healthcare professionals and our colleagues. It is not conveyed by articles or people talking. If we say that the nation will be well when pharmacy is well, we are creating an expectation which we know we can fulfill, but of which we still constantly need to be reminded.

At a national level, we are meeting with government officials and policymakers on an ongoing basis to ensure that pharmacy is not forgotten when it comes to legislation, that community pharmacy needs a sustainable income to give service to the patients out there, and that affordability has been linked to accessibility, otherwise health care will suffer as a result.

This message also needs to be repeated at branch level, to the provincial and local authorities. Invite them to meetings, make appointments to go and see them, phone them and e-mail them. Don’t ever just keep quiet and accept your fate, for it will not be one that you will like!

As this is my last column for this year, I would like to wish you a blessed Christmas and a peaceful festive season, with a prosperous 2013!

Johann Kruger
President: PSSA