In scientia opportunitas
In knowledge there is opportunity

At our recent August meeting, I had the privilege to meet and work with, for the first time, the members of the Exco. What a privilege! These are people that are dedicated to the profession and apply their minds (and souls, for that matter) to ensuring that pharmacy as a profession stays viable, vibrant and current. I am sure that we have a great term ahead of us!

Pharmacists are best trained with regard to medication, yet we constantly hear complaints that their knowledge is hardly being utilised at all. This made me wonder: What is knowledge, how do we manage it, and how do we as pharmacists apply it in our profession on a daily basis?

First of all, we need to take cognisance of the following:
• A collection of data is not information.
• A collection of information is not knowledge.
• A collection of knowledge is not wisdom.

Knowledge management is currently a hot topic of debate. During our studies, we were “filled up” with academic information, and in our daily work we are exposed to new inventions, applications and drug uses. We develop as adults in our personal lives, and learn how to handle difficult customers, what the difference is between empathy and sympathy when consoling patients, and how to be a more professional pharmacist.

This all sounds a bit much, and often we hear of “information overload”, which makes us want to get away over weekends and just shut down. Come Monday, we have to reboot and start all over again. That is why it is so important to manage and apply the knowledge and wisdom we have to maximum capacity.

Raw data has to be contextualised to be given some form of meaning. This data must be compared with other data to give it some form of relation that leads to information. Understanding these patterns between different collections of data gives us knowledge. Wisdom arises when one understands the foundational principles responsible for the patterns representing knowledge being what they are.

And wisdom is what we as pharmacists need in our daily lives. It is not just a matter of acquiring the scientific data on medicine that makes you a pharmacist, and it is not just the collection of data that we store in our grey matter. It is how we organise it and how we disseminate it, and how it is applied.

We need to “sell” our knowledge to everybody out there. What the average patient sees the community pharmacist do is “lick, stick and pour”, and we know that forms but a very small part of dispensing. If we do not tell them what happens in the screening of the script, the interpretation of the data and perhaps a call to the doctor or medical scheme to make sure everything is OK, they will never know and appreciate what we are doing for them. This is perhaps the biggest mistake we make when we market our profession.

Our work also includes contacting doctors and allied health professionals when we need to clarify issues around a patient’s condition or script. Make sure that you have your facts right and handle the situation in a professional manner. It is not an achievement to discover a mistake made by a doctor! It is your professional duty to see that the patient is not harmed: that is the application of your knowledge. The same applies to the academic educating the student. Only disseminating information to the student does little to prepare him or her to become a pharmacist, but instruction on how to apply that knowledge in practice converts that data to knowledge.

Of course, as we move from the mundane to more complex information and situations, we really need that specific piece of knowledge to become wisdom, and for us to understand and manage the relationship between the different situations we need to manage. Knowledge management would be the capture, retention and reuse of the foundation for imparting an understanding of how all these pieces fit together and how to convey them meaningfully to some other person.

There is no excuse not to use the data that you have acquired, turn that into knowledge which you should apply at every possible opportunity, and become the wise pharmacist that everyone will look up to and respect!

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