Will the innovators in pharmacy please stand up?

Jan du Toit, Executive Director: CPS

The idea for this article was borrowed from a presentation by Prof Dexter Tagwireyi, Associate Professor, University of Zimbabwe, at the Conference of the Independent Community Pharmacy Association held in Durban recently. The title of his presentation was: Will the real pharmacist please stand up?

The reason for selecting this presentation from a series of excellent addresses was to highlight the deliberate mindset shift required to move from the more traditional role of pharmacists as suppliers of medicine to shaping a pharmacy for the future, as described by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain (RPSGB) in a report, Now or never: shaping pharmacy for the future. The report emphasises that people across England should expect pharmacists to offer more than just medicine. It should be no different in South Africa.

In an effort to understand the concept of better “shaping pharmacy for the future”, a well-known World Health Organization report on the role of the pharmacist cautioned quite firmly that “effective medicine can be practised only where there is sufficient drug management”. Furthermore, “inadequacies in the provision of primary health care are attributable to shortcomings within the drug distribution chain”. Although this report was published in the 1990s, these statements are equally true today.

Therefore, access to affordable medicine of good quality in a location which is most convenient for the patient must still be the number one priority of all pharmacists, whether they work in the public or private sector. This statement should take care of the importance of the more traditional role of pharmacists.

Following the recent attendance of Pharmintercom, an annual meeting of the Community Pharmacist Sector presidents and executive directors of the seven English-speaking countries, i.e. South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, USA, Ireland, Canada and the UK, as well as the International Pharmaceutical Federation World 74th World Congress of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, the international perspective is that the traditional role of pharmacists as suppliers of medicine and of preventing “stock-outs” should not be neglected. However, it was also emphasised by most speakers at these conferences that the role of being mostly a supplier of medicine alone would no longer meet the needs of communities, or ensure a viable community pharmacy business. The following “words of wisdom” were delivered by some of these speakers to strengthen the belief that pharmacists should make a shift to the more visible role of being seen and experienced as providers of care:

“Pharmacy must act as an advocate for its own future. Pharmacists must find their future through creating demand for it as caregivers. The future is already here. It’s just not evenly distributed.”

“The window of opportunity is open now, but it may not be for long. It is a once-in-a-generation opportunity.”

“Pharmacists must seize the opportunity of technology and skill mix. Better patient care starts with you.”

“Change is inevitable. Go with those who are first”.

Many visions for pharmacy in South Africa are in circulation. The voluntary bodies have theirs, the South African Pharmacy Council (SAPC) has its own and the National Department of Health probably also has a vision as to how pharmacy will meet the healthcare needs of all the people in South Africa. The same applies to current and future models of care, which could be delivered through pharmacy. However, the preferred approach must be that all role players in pharmacy in South Africa should have a coherent viewpoint with regard to the future role of pharmacists, particularly in the envisaged National Health Insurance (NHI) system.

The RPSGB proactively addressed the challenge of a coherent viewpoint by bringing together “expertise from across pharmacy, the wider healthcare sector, patients and the public, to develop practical ideas about how future models of care can be delivered through pharmacy”. The result was the report referred to herein, but more importantly, a clear and generally accepted vision for pharmacy by all role players, including models of care to ensure that pharmacy does more than just be a supplier of medicine.

Against the background of the above initiative by the RPSGB and acceptance that the future demands a broader role for pharmacy, i.e. an international perspective, it is necessary to ensure that the vision of the National Department of Health, the SAPC and funders (medical schemes) for pharmacy in South Africa also support new models of care which involve pharmacy. Only then, will we see “a shift in funding from dispensing and supply to keeping people healthy and getting the most from medicine”.

How do we make it happen? This question brings the title of the presentation by Prof Tagwireyi, Will the real pharmacist please stand up? to mind again. According to Prof Tagwireyi, the “real pharmacists” are traditionally the innovators, instigators and initiators among us. Based on the history and development of pharmacy, including the challenges which pharmacy had to overcome for many years, the “real pharmacist” is in fact you.
Therefore, all pharmacists could play a role in “shaping our future” and driving change towards direct patient care in a location which is most convenient for the patient.¹ The purpose of this article is to request that the “innovators in pharmacy must please stand up” to ensure the mindset shift required for a broader role to be played by pharmacists. The “pharmacy wheel” has been invented several times. We do not have to do that again. The same applies to the many “crossroads” which pharmacy had to negotiate over the years in South Africa. What we need now for the purposes of survival is not new innovations, schemes, plans and diversions, or independent pharmacy to go in one direction while corporate and lay owners go in another, but rather a coherent effort by all role players to reach consensus on new models of care.

To make it happen, pharmacy in South Africa needs to establish an innovators forum that involves “real pharmacists” across the full spectrum of pharmacy in South Africa, including other healthcare professionals and policy-makers. The intention of such a forum should be to explore current opportunities, to take stock of where we are in South Africa with models of care, and whether or not as pharmacists, we are focused on the real pharmaceutical needs of the people in South Africa, as well as to determine jointly how future models of care could be delivered through pharmacy, whether as independent or corporate or lay owner pharmacies.

We also need to “shape the future” of pharmacy in South Africa rather sooner rather than later. We have a once-in-a-generation opportunity presented to us through NHI; the Centralised Chronic Medicine Dispensing and Distribution (CCMDD) programme, the National Department of Health’s Strategic Plan 2014/2015-2018/2019, the market enquiry into the private healthcare sector, an unsatisfactory business model of reliance on dispensing and an inappropriate dispensing fee based on the price of the medicine. The specific objectives of such an innovators forum for pharmacy could be the following:

To define access to medicine in the South African context and to reach consensus on the indicators that could be used to measure it²

To reach consensus on models of care specific to the South African environment, which could be provided through community pharmacies

To determine how to ensure that pharmacists provide direct patient care in a location that is most convenient for the patient, and with specific reference to the CCMDD programme of the National Department of Health and NHI

To find consensus with funders on how to encourage a shift in funding from dispensing and supply to keeping people healthy and getting the most from medicine (creating wellness)

To decide upon how pharmacists can seize the opportunity of technology and skill mix to release pharmacists’ time to provide other services and monitoring outcomes

To establish a more appropriate fee for services that is not linked to the price of the medicine.

The idea of an innovators forum would also be to identify legislation which needs to be amended in order for pharmacy to act as an advocate for its own future and to create a demand for it as a caregiver. Will the innovators in pharmacy please stand up and initiate an innovators forum whereby the “real pharmacists” come together to shape the future of pharmacy in South Africa in the best interests of the public?

References