Sandra’s chalk talk

The silly season refers to a period, usually during the summer months, when the mass media often focus on trivial or frivolous matters for lack of major news stories.

Closer to home, the silly season refers to the Christmas and New Year festive period on account of the higher-than-usual number of social engagements at which the consumption of alcohol is typical. How I wish for an academic silly season, featuring minimal formal activities, and with frivolous behaviour and numerous social engagements!

Instead, we have the “sensible season”, which occurs twice a year, once during winter, and then again during summer. It features feverish working to ensure that the study material is covered in all of the lectures, students needing revision, the setting of examination papers, the compilation of participation marks, and then the examinations themselves, with the grading of the papers and auxiliary examinations. To add insult to injury at this time, all postgraduate students conspire to keep you awake during the small hours of the morning by insisting that they need to finalise their dissertations or theses.

How do we cope with the “sensible season”? The truth is that we absolutely thrive on it. We love every moment of it. We also love the challenges posed by the new generation of students. However, we keep this a secret by constantly complaining about being overworked and not obtaining recognition for our efforts. Does this make sense to anyone? If it does, you are either currently in academia, have been there, or aspire to be.

Sadly, the reality is that the number of true academics is dwindling. Posts at universities are being vacated for greener pastures, the current academic population is ageing and retirement is the order of the day. Statistics show that it takes approximately 20 years of hard work to obtain the title of Full Professor, thus vacant posts at senior level are being advertised, but are not being filled. However, we are not discouraged by this situation as we can grow our own young academics into Full Professors. I may not be around to see some of it happen, but I have faith in the fact that there will always be those of us who absolutely thrive on the challenges of academia. However, I do wish that at some time or other, academics will experience and enjoy a silly season.

Prof Sandra van Dyk
The Academy of Pharmaceutical Sciences of South Africa: Chairman