



My experience as a production pharmacist

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Moving from academia to retail, to being an assessor/facilitator, to becoming a production pharmacist was an eye-opener for me in many ways. It gave me a holistic view of the manufacturing of tablets and a huge sense of respect when buying those same tablets from a pharmacy.

We were required to wear a white laboratory coat over our clothes covered by a disposable overcoat and disposable head and feet gear. These measures were necessary to prevent contamination. I even bought ankle boots with no laces in order to assist in this process.

Gaining insight into what the machinery looks like, how it is operated and how certain rules apply – from the weighing off of the raw materials and active ingredients to the completed tablets that are placed in containers and thereafter packed into what you and I buy – was, to say the least, something that I will never forget.

The importance of adhering to Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) was brought to my attention and I got involved in as many activities that my supervision of the operators allowed. This made a real difference in the running of the unit. I also got involved in the supervision of other units, such as signing off products of other pharmaceutical dosage forms and supervising the dispensing unit.

At the solid dosage form unit, my day started with a five to 20 minute information session. I arranged for a big white board to be placed in the packaging section where the four principles of GMP were stressed. This session was interactive, where, for example, the operators could give an example of one of the GMP pillars that needed to be adhered to and they would receive a badge for motivation purposes if they contributed. Some found these sessions very useful and soon I got feedback from those both inside and outside our unit who found these sessions very helpful and encouraging.

We also made capsules and that I found fascinating. The machine was very different from those of the tablet compressors and dyes and many more interventions by operators were required.

I also realised that the operators did what was expected of them without questioning the reason for doing certain things in a specific order, why certain powders/active ingredients were included or what the pharmacological action of the active ingredient was used for.

I enjoyed working in this unit, but there were also many challenges. Firstly, the job did not require prior experience, so I learnt from the operators. This part I enjoyed, because it made me feel useful, challenged and that I was making a difference.

The manufacturing of drugs was virtually the same from day to day. We had set times when 30-minute tea breaks were taken which provided a structural environment in which to work.

Of course there were days when everything came down at once – Medical Research Council visits that came at short notice, other pharmaceutical companies that came to inspect our facilities, fighting among staff, non-adherence to signing off of log sheets and to GMP rules, and lying and insubordination – were all part of it.

Those days made me wonder what my real part was in running the facility. But there were times when everything went smoothly and all of the compounding rooms were in order. I found that the women adhered to the rules better than the men. I found friends in them, and they became some sort of “working family” that I belonged to.

I will never forget this experience. It was a life-changing and enriching learning experience. I felt I made a difference which led to feeling the need to find out what other departments were involved in. Very soon I had a picture of the whole process from the powders/active ingredients being weighed off, to the manufacturing of dosage forms, to the products that you and I buy at pharmacies.

I learnt that there are many people involved in making the medications that we buy and I salute and respect them for their work.

Thank you for making a difference!