Who are you going to vote for?

As I write, the nomination process for the Pharmacy Council elections has begun. By the time you read this, it’ll be time to vote. I trust that you are actually going to vote and that you use your vote well.

Back to basics

It’s trite but true – you get the government you vote for. It’s not entirely true with a statutory council. In our case, the Minister appoints 16 people, and we may vote for nine. Who are these people? Does our vote really count?

Ministerial appointments vs elected members

Actually, the word “versus” implies that there is going to be conflict. There doesn’t have to be conflict. All members should have a common goal, no matter what their individual practice is. Their experiences may be different but if they focus on what Council is charged with doing, there doesn’t need to be a “them” and “us” mentality.

A quick history lesson

What does Council actually do? Obviously, its responsibilities have evolved over time, but the clue is in the long title of the Pharmacy Act. Initially, it appeared relatively simple – Council had to control training and registration of pharmacy professionals and it had to control pharmacy practice. Other activities took place too, such as inspections and disciplinary matters, but they were not included in the long title until 1997.

In 1997, ownership of pharmacies was added into the mix. Another highly significant addition was that the Amendment Act extended Council’s control to the public sector. Until that time, neither the Pharmacy Act nor the Medicines Control Act was binding on the state. It took six years before it was implemented. Why so long? Because nothing could happen until regulations had been written or amended. A lot needed to happen before the provisions of the amended Act could take effect.

So who are these people?

Coincidentally, I was elected to serve on Council in 2003, so I was given the opportunity to observe the legislative and implementation processes in action. This was the first “new format” Pharmacy Council, with one representative from each of the nine provinces. Now that the Act was binding on the state, Council was obliged to review everything and make sure that public sector pharmacists were included in decision making. It was the proverbial “no brainer”.

The Minister also appoints another seven people. The representative of the National Department of Health is also logical – Council’s activities must reflect current national policy and trends. For example, how on earth could they prepare for NHI if they don’t have insight into what is needed?

The two pharmacists who work at universities that train pharmacists are also important – Council must fulfil its mandate to educate pharmacists appropriately. Qualifications are reviewed and adapted regularly to meet the changing demands of practice.

The remaining four people are appointed at the Minister’s discretion. Only one is obliged to be someone specifically with legal knowledge. The other three may be public representatives or professional people. For the term of office that is about to end, an important appointee is Claudette Jasson, a pharmacist’s assistant. I hope that it becomes standard to appoint a pharmacist’s assistant.

Going back to the elections...

What about the nine pharmacists who are going to be elected? First and foremost, even if associations have preferred candidates, it must be remembered that elected members do not have a constituency. They are not there to “represent” their sector of pharmacy – they are there to bring their unique experience and knowledge of pharmacy to the Council. (Logic and common sense are also useful attributes.)

So your vote does count. From mid-June to mid-August, we have the opportunity to vote for pharmacists that we believe can contribute to the development of pharmacy in this country. We need to think carefully before casting our ballot. And if you don’t vote, how are the right people going to get to Council?

Personal experience of Council

At a recent meeting, I was asked about my experience as a Council member, and whether I would recommend it or not. An interesting thought.

It was indeed an exciting experience. It made me realise that you cannot go into Council with a closed mind. Whether you’re an appointed or an elected member, you need to open up and embrace all facets of pharmacy and healthcare, whether you’re in your comfort zone or not. If you don’t, you won’t make a meaningful contribution to the greater pharmacy environment. You’ll just end up bored, frustrated and ignored.

I learned that it is a long, arduous journey to travel from policy, up the legislative mountain and then transporting the policies and laws into practice.

Our challenge

We all face challenges in implementation of legislation. Make peace with it. Sometimes the law seems idiotic, at other times it appears impossible. Give support to those members of the profession who have been appointed or elected to Council. They need to know that we may not always agree with everything that they say and do but we appreciate their contribution to the management of the profession.

Lorraine Osman