



COVID-19 global pandemic, and what did the PSSA do?

In late March 2020, South Africa had embarked on an unprecedented extended nationwide lockdown in an effort to curb the spread of COVID-19 (coronavirus) and to “flatten the curve”. It was hoped that by the time you read this, the nationwide lockdown would have been lifted and the country would have managed to limit the disastrous effects of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the economic effects of the lockdown period. But at the time of writing, the worst still lies ahead. It has been predicted that South Africa has been able to delay the time of peak infections, possibly until September. By the end of April, South Africa had nearly 5 000 confirmed cases of COVID-19, having conducted more than 178 thousand tests.

For the first five weeks of lockdown, the so-called “hard lockdown”, the PSSA National office worked remotely from home. Great effort was made to ensure PSSA members could still reach the staff for professional, financial or administrative queries via email. All emails and applications were addressed as received. Book orders were accepted but will only be sent out when the level of lockdown permits it.

So during this global pandemic that has affected all spheres of living, what has the PSSA been doing?

Involvement in the Pharmacy First Working Group (PFWG)

The PFWG was initially formed between the Independent Community Pharmacy Association (ICPA) and the four largest corporate community pharmacy groups. The PSSA and the South African Pharmacy Council (SAPC) were then invited to join the Forum.

The purpose of this Forum is to address issues regarding community pharmacy in general. During March, a number of Zoom meetings took place to address current issues experienced with regards to COVID-19 including:

- a. A guideline for community pharmacies on how to prevent COVID-19 infections was developed and published on 24 March 2020.
- b. On the same day the PFWG put out a media release about limitations on the dispensing and sale of medicines in order to maintain the integrity of the supply chain.

- c. The Forum sent a letter to the SAPC on 25 March 2020 regarding the infection prevention guideline document they published on 22 March 2020. It was emphasised that this is a guideline document and not a minimum standard that is enforceable. A copy of the letter was circulated to members in PSSA newsletter 11 on 26 March.
- d. It was brought to the attention of the Forum that hiccups were experienced by pharmacies who wanted to register on the Department of Trade and Industry's (DTI) *Bizportal*. The challenge occurred when the form of business ownership was anything other than a registered company. Pharmacies formed as a sole proprietorship, partnership, closed corporation or trust were unable to register as essential service providers during the lockdown. Both PSSA and ICPA wrote to SAPC on 25 March regarding this difficulty. SAPC escalated this issue to the Minister of DTI, suggesting that the same exemption that had been granted to persons registered with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) be granted to pharmacies registered with the SAPC. It was motivated that the SAPC register for pharmacies is available and searchable online.
- e. This Forum provided a good platform for stakeholder discussions on current issues experienced across the profession so that decisions could be taken that were in the best interest of patients and pharmaceutical personnel. Current issues experienced in the workplace, shortage of staff, continuing confusion regarding the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and specifically masks, in the different settings, private hospital pharmacies sending patients with prescriptions for chronic conditions to community pharmacies in order to reduce the number of patients entering hospitals, and the issues surrounding rapid screening-tests sold by pharmacies were among the issues listed and discussed.
- f. On 1 April 2020, a link to a Google Excel spreadsheet was released where pharmacies who needed “extra hands” could list their details and pharmacy staff who were willing to volunteer their time and services could list their information. Full details were included in newsletter 12 to members.

Sharing of information

Much information needed to be shared and disseminated to members who were working on the frontline during this time. The PSSA assisted in sharing the following information via newsletters, emails or social media:

- a. Both the SAPC (23 March 2020) and the NDoH (26 March 2020) released communication on the rational use of chloroquine containing products. In clinical trials it appeared that chloroquine could be used as a means of controlling systemic cytokine release in critically ill patients, such as in pneumonia associated with COVID-19. However, it would not cure the COVID-19 viral infection in those patients. Unfortunately, when news of this initial finding became public knowledge many patients and doctors wanted chloroquine tablets for "in case". This placed unnecessary strain on the supply chain and impacted on the uninterrupted therapy for patients using chloroquine containing products for chronic conditions on a long-term basis.
- b. The National Department of Health (NDoH) released a guideline on the influenza vaccine for 2020 on 24 March, prioritising certain vulnerable groups including all healthcare workers who should be first considered for access to the vaccine. It was however also noted that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of patients who requested an influenza vaccine was substantially higher than previous years, which resulted in limited supply.
- c. The NDoH released communication on 26 March 2020 requesting the rational use of medicines in general during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to maintain the integrity of the supply chain.
- d. South African Health Product Regulatory Authority (SAHPRA) communication regarding rapid tests for COVID-19 released on 30 March 2020 cautioned that there is not yet an approved rapid test kit for COVID-19 and that healthcare providers should refrain from buying and/or selling these test kits.

General matters

The PSSA attended to various general matters during this time. An executive decision was made that the PSSA National Office, branches and sectors would not create their own information during this time, but will only share information from valid/credible/reliable sources. The primary sources would be the NDoH, followed by the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) and then international sources such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Pharmaceutical Federation (FIP). This is in order to ensure that only information that is valid and relevant to South Africa is disseminated. Information from the SAPC relating to COVID-19 was also shared as it affected the pharmacy profession, but it was not used as a source for information on COVID-19.

The lockdown regulations require all internet sites operating within the .za top level domain name to have a landing page with a

visible link to www.sacoronavirus.co.za. The PSSA and all branches and sectors with websites have complied with this regulation.

In light of the uncertainty about when the lockdown would be lifted, the National Executive Committee meeting of the PSSA that was scheduled to take place in May was cancelled and it was agreed that urgent matters could be discussed electronically. The Presidential Committee will meet at some stage to discuss urgent matters.

The organising committee of the PSSA 75th AGM and Conference 2020 had a spectacular celebration planned for August in Port Elizabeth. However, in light of the global, and more specifically the local situation, in terms of COVID-19 the PSSA has made the decision to postpone the conference. Once a new date has been confirmed with the venue it will be communicated to members.

It was a new experience to most of the staff at the National Office to be working from home during the lockdown. We believe that it worked well and even though we missed the personal interaction with our members over the phone, work could continue. New members joined the PSSA during this time, and also applied for professional indemnity insurance. The professional office team could also still assist members with queries via email. A big thank you to Gary Black from the Cape Western Province branch who assisted the National Office during this time.

Saying goodbye

During the lockdown period, it was also time to say goodbye to Jan du Toit who has been the director to the South African Association for Community Pharmacists (SAACP) sector for the last 6 years. The PSSA would like to thank Jan for his dedication to not only the PSSA, SAACP and SAAHIP (he is a former President) but to the pharmacy profession in general. We know that Jan will continue to serve the profession as Councillor of the SAPC for the remainder of his term and we look forward to continue seeing him on the pharmacy stage and at future pharmacy events. We wish you a peaceful and blessed retirement, Jan!

The future normal

It was interesting to see that during the pandemic the healthcare workers (and all the other essential workers) of countries became the cornerstone of keeping countries afloat during the COVID-19 pandemic and not politicians, CEOs and celebrities. It is our hope that after this pandemic healthcare workers, and especially pharmacists, will be seen as more valued for the precious commodity they are and not seen just as "pill counters".