

Fifty years in pharmacy – making my life fifty shades brighter

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As a delegate to the first SAAHIP Conference and the accompanying 30th AGM in 1987, I did not dream that I would still be alive and kicking and talking to an audience at the 33rd Conference, 32 years later in 2019.

The theme of this conference, “Fifty Shades Brighter” appealed to me because I had spent well over fifty years practising as a pharmacist, mostly in South Africa.

During my career, there have been vast changes in hospital pharmacy practice, including technological advances such as the introduction of computers, the internet, email, and cell phones, to name a fraction of them. New diseases such as HIV and Ebola have emerged, and the antiretrovirals to treat the former.

Why did I choose to study pharmacy?

- I could earn money while doing my apprenticeship and then I would be able to fund my tuition while working part time as an “unqualified” in retail. This was ideal because my family did not have the means to support me while I studied.
- It offered a variety of work environments.
- It offered opportunities to travel while working.
- Important to me, should I get married and raise a family there would be opportunities to work part time and do locums.
- I considered it to be relatively well paid.

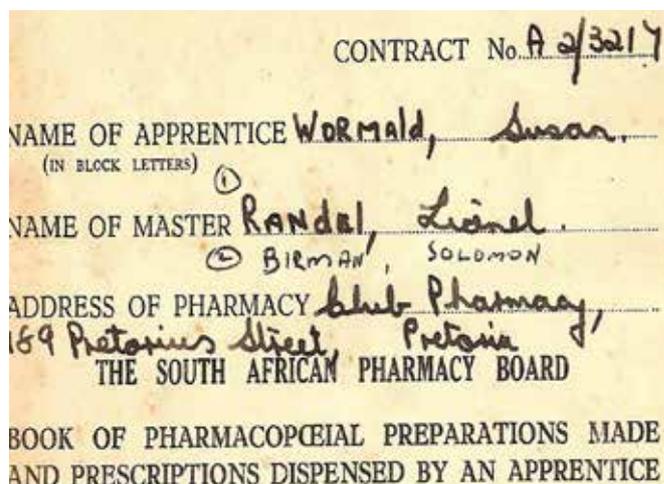


A photograph in *Die Natalier*

It was an unusual profession for a woman in those days. On 28 March 1958, *Die Natalier*, a daily newspaper, published a photo and a short account about how more and more women were embarking on this difficult career.

Apprenticeship

During my two year apprenticeship, I was required to record (in a book provided by the Pharmacy Board) compounding of a certain number of mixtures, ointments and other compounded medicines, as well as the formulae, and which my “master” had to sign off.



The cover of my prescription book

In those days, prescriptions were transcribed by hand into large prescription books and labels were also handwritten.

The prescriptions were very different from today, particularly seeing that imperial measurements were used to describe apothecaries’ weights and measures.

After completing my apprenticeship, I left Pretoria to study at the Durban Pharmacy School, one of four in the country. The other three were in Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Port Elizabeth. The Pharmacy Board appointed external examiners who set exam papers every year for all the students at the four pharmacy schools, who all wrote the same examination in each subject. We had to know everything. There were no clues from lecturers!

17th September	E5102	Gazole	Shasha
18th September	E5103	Misture	B. Ines
18th September	E5105	Misture	B. Ines
2nd September	E5139	Powder	B. Ines
2nd September	E5143	Inhalation	B. Ines
6th September	(526)	Misture	B. Ines

An extract from a list of prescriptions I dispensed in 1958

15
 Menthol
 at abiet.
 at. luvulyp.
 7. Benz. Co
 2g: 3i in hot boiling water. Steam bath

A 1958 prescription

In addition, two universities (Potchefstroom and Rhodes) offered degrees in pharmacy.

Working as a pharmacist

I started in a small country hospital, and have worked in South Africa in hospitals large and small, private and government. They have been located in cities, small towns, and in remote areas. In most, I earned less than my male counterparts.

For twenty-three years, I was employed by the Natal Provincial Administration. My most interesting work was in the Quality Control laboratory at the Provincial Medical Supply Centre. I was also a member of the Tender Advisory committee. It broadened my knowledge on Good Manufacturing Practice, Quality Assurance, and the tender system.

While there, I managed to successfully study part time for and obtain a Diploma in Public Administration. I was grateful to the Department for the bursary they provided.

In 1990 I was transferred to head office in Pietermaritzburg, where I was part of the pharmacy inspectorate, and a member of various committees, one being the Coding Committee, of which I was the secretary. I also processed the clinical trial applications.

My eight years at head office included experiencing the changes involved when the National Drug Policy was introduced in the 1990s. I represented KZN at many meetings in the offices of the Department of Health. I was on the committee compiling the first Essential Drugs List. It comprised only about 145 pages. The latest on-line version comprises nearly 600 pages.

Adventure in Kalulushi

My choice of profession has provided me with opportunities that I never dreamt possible when I left school, including a three-



Mokambo border post between Congo and Zambia, 1965

month locum in Chibuluma Mine Hospital in Kalulushi on the Zambian copper belt. In September 1965 I was offered a first class air ticket, but I opted for the cash so that I could drive there in my newly acquired Mini Cooper S.

Having the vehicle enabled me to see, inter alia, the local countryside, the newly completed Kariba Dam, and the Victoria Falls. Before returning home, I also decided to drive to the Congo border. That little adventure could have turned nasty if I had not had a French-speaking friend accompanying me. The French-speaking border official allowed us in but we had to agree to have a soldier with his rifle accompany us in the Mini. The derelict-looking town was so small it was not a long drive. After a stop at a beer hall for Coca-Cola, we returned to the border post and were allowed to cross the border back into Zambia, all this without our passports!

Working in the United Kingdom

Prior to, and during, my retirement, I have worked in the UK. My first stint in 1998 was as a relief pharmacist for a company that had pharmacies scattered around Cheshire and Wales. During my 5 months there, I worked in 26 different pharmacies, of varying sizes.

For 6 years after retiring, I regularly flew to the UK to do hospital locums. One weekend, during a locum in Plymouth I did the short flight to Jersey, one of the Channel Islands, to fulfil my dream of visiting the zoo established by the author Gerald Durrell. Except for one locum in Chelmsford, the rest of my stints were at the Western Infirmary in Glasgow, which I regarded as a second home until I stopped doing locums in 2006.

My professional home

I believe that being a professional is not a 9 to 5 job. I cannot envisage being a member of a profession and not being a member of its professional organisation.

In retrospect, it is my membership of the Pharmaceutical Students' Associations, the PSSA, and SAAHIP, that has largely contributed to making my life brighter. I have served on various committees, as a student and as a member of the KZN Inland and KZN Coastal SAAHIP branches.

The very first conference I attended was the South African Pharmaceutical Students' Federation (SAPSF) conference held in Cape Town in 1961. There were only three delegates from Natal, and a total of two female delegates at the conference!



SAPSF Conference 1961 – can you spot Natie Finkelstein and Dave Sieff?

The first SAAHIP conference in 1887



(l to r) Jan du Toit (who later became SAAHIP President), Ian Moore (President) and Joe Cohen (Honorary Secretary)

Editor of Forum

The time I spent as editor of Forum was especially rewarding. Thinking back on those years, I am amazed at how much was achieved using a typewriter and the postal service. I am proud to say that FORUM kept members abreast of all SAAHIP activities and developments and I believe that the members have never been better informed as they were then, despite Facebook, an expensive website, and email.

Forum was started by Mike Timms in 1976 as a newsletter for the members of the Natal Coastal Branch. It was such a success that other branches wanted to be included. At Mike's request I took over as Editor in September 1980. The July 1987 issue was the last issue I edited. Corry van der Walt of the Eastern Cape Branch took over until the last issue was published in 1992. Thereafter it was incorporated into the SAPJ.

SAPC

My longest and most lasting professional relationship has been with the pharmacy regulatory body. Firstly, when it was the South African Pharmacy Board, and subsequently, when it became the South African Pharmacy Council.

Throughout my life as a pharmacist I have made it my business to submit comments that I had on draft legislation affecting pharmacy or me as a citizen. I still comment on proposed legislation. I still write opinion pieces and letters when I feel strongly about events, good or bad, that affect the profession or me. I have also commented on the SAPC annual and financial reports, much to their surprise.

Do you want to know what the Council does with your hard-earned money? I strongly recommend that you study their annual reports. These are printed in the *Pharmaciae* on the Council's website.

Facebook woes

I find it most disturbing that pharmacists use Facebook pages to complain about aspects of pharmacy, doctors' prescriptions, the SAPC, and their fees. During the last Council election, there was a spate of comments about the ballot papers and the council elections. I have learnt that a letter that clearly outlines one's complaint and offers a solution, carries more weight than public comments. Certainly a lot of the negativity displayed is counterproductive.

Leadership of the profession

I am an avid student of the history of PSSA and SAAHIP. I have read through years of minutes and presidents' reports dating back to 1957 and I know how hard those committees have worked and what they have achieved.

They worked tirelessly at setting standards for hospital pharmacy, for improved salaries, fighting discrimination, and they worked at getting the sector of Institutional Pharmacy recognised in the first place. As pharmacists today you are reaping those benefits.

I am proud to have known many of those dedicated pharmacists, members of SAAHIP, the stalwarts of pharmacy, who are no longer with us. I learnt so much from them. It is my observation that not much mentorship takes place these days, and sometimes the finer details of what keeps an organisation running effectively is lost along the way.

My profession, my passion

I have achieved what I set out to do when I started my career. I have travelled as planned. I think that I have made a success of my career, and I believe that I have behaved professionally at all times. When obstacles appeared, my perseverance helped me overcome them.

Throughout my career I have met colleagues at work and socially, and numerous people in the pharmaceutical industry, from reps to key accounts managers and managing directors, who have been helpful and some became lifelong friends. They all have made my life brighter.

If it were not for my passion for pharmacy, I would not be here today.