



A Piece of my Mind

Editorial Comment

Life during the pandemic

The world as we knew it has come to an end. "Normal" has changed. Will it ever be the same again? Probably not for a long time, when you and I are long gone and the "new normal" has become a habit. Let's not discuss the facts and figures here – we're all literate and hopefully we read credible reports and view and analyse enough to have formed an opinion which informs how we act and react. (Mm, I'm hoping that you subscribe to Druginfo – if you don't, you're probably not reading this.)

I'm going to limit myself to speaking about two incidents that made me happy. Yes, during this difficult time, there have been moments of "Wow – we are recognised!"

Pharmacy Month

No, I haven't gone crazy. Yet. I was recently reminded twice of our annual activities intended to raise awareness of the valuable contribution that pharmacists make to healthcare. We all try during Pharmacy Month, but we sometimes feel discouraged because we don't always see evidence that our efforts are appreciated. Watching the news and reading comments on Twitter showed us that there are important people who recognise the impact of our labour.

President Ramaphosa

The first time was on the day that the lockdown was announced. I don't need to remind you that we were given three days to prepare for a 21-day hard lockdown. President Cyril Ramaphosa announced that only essential services would be able, or in fact required, to operate during this time. The screenshot below was taken as the announcement was made about which services would be considered to be essential.

Thank you, President Ramaphosa, for acknowledging that pharmacists provide essential services. It's a pity that some of the media forgot to mention their contribution when naming only doctors and nurses as health care providers, but let's be kind and say that everyone was under strain, including journalists, so it was easy to overlook some things.



Dr Zweli Mkhize

Many, many years ago (in 2003, actually), Pharmacy Week, as it was then, was launched in Isithumba Village in KwaXimba, KwaZulu-Natal by Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, the Minister of Health. The current Minister of Health, Dr Zweli Mkhize, then provincial MEC for Health, also attended. I may be romanticising it, but I'd like to believe that the Minister's relationship with pharmacists was boosted by meeting PSSA vice-president, Cyril Shabalala, and member, Pauline Randles in those beautiful hills.

And then there was Twitter!



I can't add to that!

The last word

I'll leave the last word to Briony Chisholm, a pharmacist from Cape Town. She had a bad day during the lockdown and decided to take a break from social media. She has given me permission to use her Facebook post to explain why she made this decision.

I owe y'all an apology for my teeny tiny tantrum yesterday. It started with the pictures of Sea Point promenade on Friday, amidst the cries of 'don't treat us like children! I realise some orders from government are a little sketchy at present but, if ever there was a display of people who needed to be treated like children....

Every single one of those people had a choice: to join a thronging, heavily-breathing mass of people during a global pandemic, as the numbers are climbing, right there, where they were breathing, hugging etc., many without masks. The choice they made was hardly adult.

Then yesterday, I was invited to join a Facebook page concerning lockdown and made the mistake of going onto the page, briefly, to be met by tone-deaf, privileged, racist and conspiracy theorist rants. It made me sad. I know there are reasonable, well-thought out arguments to opening the economy, too. They just weren't there. Here, too, I apologise if I didn't give it enough time to read enough posts and find them but, no. It was just the straw that broke this camel's back and I totally lost my sense of humour and faith in humankind.

A PIECE OF MY MIND

You see, I'm working from the public health perspective. On a daily basis, I have to read new studies that detail the awfulness of this disease, reports from frontline health workers, and the protocols to be followed. And it's utterly terrifying. I am equally worried about people starving and I'm doing everything I can possibly do to help (if we all do, maybe it'll make a difference?). I am absolutely clueless when it comes to economy things, so I'm not going to even pretend to know what the figures and calculations mean.

I'm working with the health numbers. Those ones I understand. Numbers of cases, numbers of deaths. In New York, at its peak, 800 people died in one day. They are burying people in mass graves. In Bergamo, deaths were up over 550% compared to their normal March death rate. Our numbers here in the Western Cape are climbing. And yes, I do know people who've had it. Here.

In those developed countries, health systems flailed, healthcare workers were exhausted, and caught it and died, amongst the hundreds of others. Those healthcare workers, here, are our friends, our families. And those sick people, when the virus peaks here? Also our families, our friends. Don't be fooled into a weird sort of complacency thinking it's not coming. It is. I am hoping that some weird miracle makes us the Chosen People who'll get through unscathed but that's just my (unrealistic) Pollyannaism.

The peak is still coming. The lockdown is to stop it from doing what it's done in countless other countries globally: overwhelm systems and result in tens-of-thousands of deaths. We are, currently, getting that right. That does not preclude us from thousands of deaths when it comes. It just, hopefully, allows us to lower our death toll.

I get that the economy needs to survive, too, for people to survive, I have no answer to how that balance is worked out. Nobody does. Globally. I

can't argue for/against the opening the economy discussions because I don't know enough. I promise that I'm reading them and I'm thinking about them and I'm digesting them. None of them has convinced me, yet, when I weigh them up against the public health implications, that opening everything up is the way to go. I may be completely wrong.

While we're on it, can we stop the 'look at Sweden' theme, please? Even non-economy-minded me can see that from absolutely no angle can South Africa be compared to Sweden. It's nonsensical. And their numbers are rising.

I guess that's the point: nobody knows, yet, the best way to do this. And the best way for one country won't work for everyone else either. That's the bit that terrifies me most. There are SO many unknowns.

The only way to get through this, in my thinking (and as I've repeatedly said, I'm no expert on any of this stuff and I may be completely wrong... if you're looking for expert opinion, there's a plethora of stuff on offer by the Google gods), at this point, is to protect each other. No, this is not about you. It's not about me. It's not about whether you've got chardonnay to have with your dinner. It's about us all, the collective, making sure we protect each other. The healthy and, especially, the vulnerable, of which there are so many in this beloved country of ours.

Let me stop now. Again, apologies. All I seem to be doing is ranting. I'll stop that.

At the most basic level: if you don't want to wear a mask for you, wear it for your granny, your mother, me.

Wash your paws, lovelies, and kisses to you all. You're precious things x

Lorraine Osman