

# The role of a community service pharmacist in public primary health care

**Bianka Naude**

Community service pharmacist at Joubertina Community Health Centre, Eastern Cape

Although most pharmacists complete their community service year in the public sector, some are placed in primary health care (PHC) facilities, as opposed to hospitals. PHC plays an important role in our health sector as it caters to the majority of our population. This is a short reflection on my experiences as a community service pharmacist in a PHC facility.

## What is the role of the pharmacist within PHC?

As in all healthcare settings, pharmacists in PHC facilities, such as community health centres and larger clinics, are expected to be the custodians of medicine. They are therefore expected to fulfil the usual gatekeeper roles. However, during my community service year, I have found that some of our roles play a more prominent part in daily practice.

Assisting patients with medicine identification has been one of the things that I've been incorporating into my daily practice. In the private sector, there are generally multiple generic options for a single medication and the patient receives the same generic every month, unless there is a stock problem. In public sector PHC facilities, the pharmacy stocks whichever generic is currently on tender and in stock at the provincial pharmaceutical depot. Changes in the appearance of medicines can lead to confusion for patients. On many occasions, patients have returned to the pharmacy because they think that they have received the wrong medication. In order to address this problem, I have found that it helps to inform patients where to find the name of the active pharmaceutical ingredient on the medicine package. Alternatively, I write what the medicine is used for on the medication label (for example, cholesterol or high blood pressure). Clear communication is key, and also allowing the patient the chance to ask questions, if necessary.

I have found that one of the dreaded roles of a pharmacist in a PHC facility is ensuring stock availability. Before I started my community service this year, I ensured that I knew all the necessary stock calculations and I thought that implementing these would ensure stock availability. The inevitable truth is that, no matter how much you prepare, at some point, an essential medication will be out of stock.

My biggest problem this year has been with anthelmintics. It is easy enough to tell a patient that their vitamin tablets are out of stock but having to explain to a mother that you do not have the necessary medicine to treat their child's worm infestation is infinitely harder.

Assisting the nurses and other health care professionals with pharmacological information and dose calculations is another important role that we play. Pharmacists have extensive knowledge with regards to medicine information and we need to make use of it. If I see a prescription where there is a potential issue or incorrect dosage, I always approach the doctor or nurse who prescribed it. Not everyone is open to this, and some of the health care professionals might even take offence, but this is what we as pharmacists are trained to do. We are not just there to dispense the prescription as is. We need to ensure that the right patient receives the right medication at the right dose and the right dosing interval, and for the right duration.

## How can we change perceptions?

I found myself stepping into new and different roles this year. I have become the IT specialist, as no one else knows how to fix the errors that appear on the printer, and we do not have IT personnel on the premises. I also had to put on my maintenance hat and determine the specifications of all the fridges in the health centre in preparation for the vaccine rollout.

This year I have found that the role of pharmacists within the PHC is not valued by all the other health care professionals. I have been challenged by some of my colleagues for doing things in certain ways and some have been offended by my questioning their prescribing of a medicine or wanting to correct a dose. I think pharmacists are underappreciated due to the lack of presence of pharmacists within PHC facilities and because not all health care professionals understand the role that pharmacists can play within the health care team.

We need to become more actively involved. Advocate for the pharmacy profession. Communicate with the other health care professionals. Lay claim to our role as pharmacists. Pharmacists have a lot more to offer than most people think.