



A Piece of my Mind

Editorial Comment

Should I or shouldn't I?

I started thinking about the way that I relate to people has changed over the years, and particularly within the working context. Naturally, I transferred my thoughts into writing – old habits die hard. Should I publish it as *A Piece of my Mind*? Is it relevant to your practice, or is it just part of my personal journey? We all have our own personal journeys, but the past 22 months have shown us that there's often a lot of overlap. We usually don't talk about it, but maybe I should share my personal work communication experience – maybe it will ring a bell.

Going back to basics

I've been reflecting on the way my working preferences changed over the years. When I was 17 years old, I finished school (where the only extramural activity that I'd enjoyed had been the debating society) and went straight to work in a clinical microbiology laboratory. In those days, you worked during the day, and went to the Tech three nights a week. My physiology lecturer was a young man, who became my significant other 44 years later – thank goodness I passed physiology that year.

I loved working in the lab but I volunteered for evening shifts and public holidays when I worked on my own with the pathologist. I much preferred that to working with other people – at least I didn't have to talk to them.

I also discovered that I got highly irritated when phoning doctors with urinary microscopic, culture and sensitivity results – especially the one who commented, "Oh, so THAT's why my wife isn't responding to the antibiotic I gave her!". I'm glad I was never his patient.

And then I discovered flowers

My parents decided to buy a florist shop, so I qualified as a florist. This was in the olden days when natural was unnatural and flowers needed to do as you wanted them to do. Quite a challenge. During my final exam, I was working on an intricate wedding bouquet and, while I prepared something to put in it, I let the work in progress hang from a Coke bottle so that I had both hands free. Imagine how I felt when I realised that some low hanging flowers had landed in a cup of coffee next to the Coke bottle! Quick repair work needed there!

In that job, we worked with people, but flowers usually make people happy. Yes, there were the funeral flowers, but hopefully, they brought some peace and tranquillity to those who were grieving a loss. On the evenings before Mother's Day and Christmas Day, my mom and I seldom got home before midnight. Our drivers needed to go home early, so we carried on with deliveries. And the recipients always appreciated it.

Students are nicer than people!

Ten years after leaving school, I eventually realised that I wanted to study pharmacy, and despite being constantly anxious, I really enjoyed it – all those fairy tales, especially organic chemistry. And I'm still in awe that my electrons may be roaming around in a different room from me! (Can I trust them there?)

It was fairly inevitable that, after my internship in community pharmacy, I would end up in academia. The people I met in community pharmacy didn't want to be there – they were ill, and felt miserable and irritable. So when I met students, it was such a pleasure. I really enjoyed their enthusiasm. Most of them really wanted to enter the profession. Compared to dealing with "customers", interacting with students was an absolute pleasure. And it still is. They WANT to make things work!

Working in regulatory pharmacy

When I left Wits, I worked for a short while in animal health product registration. I thought I would enjoy it because there would be minimal contact with other people and lots of reading. I'm afraid it was about 30 years too early for me. I sourced all information, including site master plans, via email from Ireland and France, but the MCC insisted on pieces of paper, so I sat staring at files and piles of paper covering the walls of my office, I really didn't understand why the information couldn't be communicated electronically. Maybe I'd enjoy it more nowadays.

Next step – the PSSA!

I learned that one communication style does not fit all! Phones never stop ringing – pharmacists, consumers, regulators. And then there is the SAPJ, so along come authors and readers and advertisers. Most of them also use email, and to my lasting embarrassment and irritation, I just never managed (then or now) to keep up with them.

Don't get me started on meetings, either. I'm exhausted just thinking about them. International meetings were fun though – you generally needed to speak slowly and enunciate every word clearly because many participants were not English speakers. I remember an earnest conversation I had with one delegate at a conference in Portugal. We both spoke slowly and clearly, until I realised that he was American and his home language was (apparently) English so we could actually speak normally to each other! At least we had a good laugh about our initial conversation.

Media relations

What a challenge! Especially in the early days of the pricing regulations. I could write a thesis on this! Let me just say that I learned a lot. For example, a live broadcast is better than a pre-recorded one – your

words can't be distorted during editing! Always have an opinion and a message – “no comment” doesn't help to build useful relationships.

The SAPJ

I think I finally found a communication style that suits me – I enjoy reading and writing. At times, my time management skills might be a bit lacking, but I love the SAPJ and the Medpharm team behind it. And thank you, PSSA, for letting me continue with it after retirement.

Hospital pharmacy

For many years, I worked part-time in hospital pharmacy. Funnily enough, I didn't mind communicating there – it was mostly unemo-

tional and factual discussions with nurses or doctors. I can cope with that. I could even cope with disagreements with them – I would much rather argue with a nurse or a doctor than have conflict with a consumer in a community pharmacy!

And then came COVID-19

How has COVID-19 affected your relationships with people? At work? At home? I think I've basically turned into a recluse. I'd be interested in hearing of your experience in maintaining communication skills.

Lorraine Osman