



Charting the course: a South African pharmacy roadmap for 2025

Natalie Schellack

Editor: SA Pharmaceutical Journal

“The best way to predict the future is to create it.”
– Peter Drucker

As we navigate the complex landscape of South African pharmacy in 2025, embracing innovation and shaping our destiny is not merely an aspiration, but a necessity.

The field of medicine has undergone transformative changes over the past three decades, with advances in basic sciences increasingly translated into clinical applications, improving lives and outcomes.¹ The rapid development of mRNA vaccines against SARS-CoV-2 amid a global pandemic exemplifies the convergence of decades of basic science and translational research, saving millions of lives.¹ This breakthrough underscores the potential for innovative pharmaceutical solutions to address urgent global health challenges.

However, these scientific advancements remain unevenly distributed. The COVID-19 pandemic starkly highlighted health inequities within and between nations.^{1,2} As we navigate the complexities of drug pricing and policy changes in South Africa, we must remain cognisant of these global disparities and strive for equitable access to pharmaceutical innovations.^{1,2} Looking ahead, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in pharmacy practice and the evolving roles of pharmacists align with broader trends in healthcare. Globally healthcare is transitioning from a reactive model to one that is proactive, personalised, and preventive.^{1,2} For pharmacists, this could mean leveraging AI-powered diagnostic tools, participating in personalised medicine initiatives, and playing a more integral role in interdisciplinary care teams.^{1,2}

In South Africa as we celebrate the achievements in our field and plan for the future, let us heed the call to ensure that our advancements are not confined to the wealthy but are accessible to all South Africans. The journey ahead is as much about technology as it is about our collective values and shared commitment to improving human health. The Pharmaceutical Society of South Africa (PSSA) strives to be the *“undisputed leader and guardian of the pharmacy profession”*, as President Rabali eloquently states.³ But what does true leadership and guardianship entail in a rapidly changing landscape? It demands we confront the complexities of drug pricing, embrace the potential of AI equitably, and empower pharmacists and pharmacy support staff to face a complex interplay of challenges and opportunities.

The success of the 82nd FIP Congress hosted in South Africa – a first for sub-Saharan Africa – is a testament to the dedication and expertise of our pharmacy professionals. As President Rabali notes,³ this achievement positions us as leaders on the global stage. But what are our next steps? South Africa’s pharmaceutical landscape remains challenged for economic growth with the high demand of the volume of patients in healthcare, as affordability concerns create financial barriers, and high pricing.

These pressures are multifaceted, stemming from a combination of factors, mostly related to affordability concerns. A substantial portion of the South African population face financial barriers to accessing necessary medications, particularly in the context of chronic diseases with even greater expense. Despite generic medicines offering a more affordable alternative, their uptake can be hindered by various factors, including prescriber preferences, patient perceptions, and regulatory complexities. Therefore, the importance of the Essential Medicine List (EML) and adherence to the EML has been highlighted by Leong et al.⁴ stating, *“consideration of affordability for EML inclusions/exclusions is paramount”*.

Further to this the need for robust economic evaluations and Health Technology Assessments (HTAs) in this context is critical, as highlighted by Leong et al.⁴ Their analysis of four case studies demonstrates how different economic evaluation methods – including international reference pricing, cost-minimisation, cost-effectiveness, and cost-utility analysis – have influenced decision-making by the National Essential Medicines List Committee (NEMLC) and impacted access to medicines in the South African public sector.⁴ The study emphasises that a standardised HTA evaluation process, underpinned by a nationally accepted framework, is necessary for evidence-informed selection of essential medicines.⁴ Furthermore, the significance of cost-effectiveness, affordability, and resource use should be consistently included when making decisions on new interventions. Since the inception of the South African EML in 1996, economic evaluations have evolved from cost-minimisation to more complex model-based cost-effectiveness with budget impact analyses to better inform decisions using the GRADE approach.⁴

While the South African drug pricing environment is primarily shaped by domestic factors, it is important to acknowledge potential influences stemming from global dynamics. For instance, policies

enacted during the current United States Trump administration, such as those related to international trade and pharmaceutical innovation incentives, could *indirectly* affect the strategies of multinational pharmaceutical companies operating in South Africa. Changes to trade agreements could impact the cost of imported pharmaceutical ingredients or finished products. However, it is crucial to assess the magnitude and direction of these effects, as South Africa has its own trade relationships and import/export dynamics. Policies impacting pharmaceutical innovation in major markets like the US could, in the long run, affect the availability of new medicines in South Africa, as companies prioritise markets with higher returns on investment. This highlights the need for South Africa to foster its own research and development capacity and explore alternative innovation models.

Despite the challenges faced by the pharmacy profession in 2024, there are reasons for optimism as we look towards 2025.² While the industry has experienced significant pressures, including pharmacy closures, financial constraints, and workforce shortages, several opportunities for growth and innovation are emerging. The American Society of Health-System Pharmacists' 2025 Pharmacy Forecast highlights key areas of development, including the utilisation of AI and the expanding role of pharmacists in primary care.² These advancements align with the local (National Health Insurance) and global trend towards more proactive, personalised, and preventive healthcare models.^{2,5,6}

In the UK, the introduction of a new cohort of pharmacists who will become prescribers upon registration in 2026 is set to expand pharmacist prescribing services across Great Britain.^{2,6} This development, coupled with changes to pharmacy technician roles and hub-and-spoke dispensing legislation, may allow pharmacists more time to focus on patient-facing care.^{2,6} The integration of technology, such as automated dispensing systems and AI-driven drug interactions analysis, is becoming essential for delivering high-quality care and remaining competitive in the job market. These innovations offer opportunities for pharmacists to enhance their roles and improve patient outcomes.^{2,6}

As we navigate these changes, it is crucial for the pharmacy profession to adapt, embrace innovation, and advocate for policies that support both the industry and patient care. By focusing on these opportunities, pharmacists can continue to play a vital role in improving healthcare outcomes and addressing the challenges that lie ahead.

References

1. The Future of Medicine. *Nat Med.* 2025;31(1). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-024-03464-y>.
2. PJ view: There are still reasons to be optimistic about pharmacy in 2025, despite a challenging 2024. *The Pharmaceutical Journal*, 2024;13(7992). <https://doi.org/10.1211/PJ.2024.1.341495>.
3. Rabali T. President's report. *South African Pharmaceutical Journal.* 2025;92(1):5-6.
4. Leong TD, Miot J, Parrish A, et al. Case studies of health economic analyses informing pharmaceutical health technology assessments for essential medicine selection and public-sector guidelines in South Africa. *BMC Health Services Research.* 2024;24(1):484. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266462324000448>.
5. Mafarafara NG. SAAHIP Presidential Annual Report 2024/2025. *South African Pharmaceutical Journal.* 2025;92(1).
6. Raza MA, Aziz S, Noreen M, et al. Artificial Intelligence (AI) in pharmacy: an overview of innovations. *InnovPharm.* 2022;13(2). <https://doi.org/10.24926/iip.v13i2.4839>