



## Stewardship in crisis: the role of young pharmacists in South Africa's evolving healthcare landscape

Imagine a narrative more significant than any of us—a story written not in accolades or titles but in lives improved and communities uplifted. Every life saved, and every pain eased by medicine is a fragment of a larger story that hinges partly, but significantly, on pharmacists' hands in a multidisciplinary healthcare team. Yet today, that story is under threat. Young pharmacists who are trained to heal, are finding themselves without roles to fulfil. The unemployment crisis facing newly qualified pharmacists in South Africa is more than just a concern; it is an exigent situation that requires urgent attention and action.

Unfortunately, this issue is not unique to young pharmacists. Numerous youth in South Africa find themselves without jobs. StatsSA released a report in 2024, stating that “the percentage of young people **actively looking** for work but **unable to find it** climbed from 36,8% in 2014 to 45,5% in 2024.” This is an 8,7% increase in a space of 10-years, a chronic disease that has been slowly forming over years.

Each year, South African universities produce a significant number of pharmacy graduates. However, it appears that strategic plans that were meant to be designed long ago, did not create the platform to absorb young pharmacists who would provide much needed relief to an overburdened healthcare system. Hence many young pharmacists find themselves qualified, skilled, and ready to serve the population but unable to. The severity of the issue has sparked protests and sit-ins by unemployed pharmacists in provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal

and Gauteng. These protests, often led by young pharmacists who are passionate about their profession, demand urgent intervention and employment opportunities.

The PSSA Young Pharmacists' Group distributed a survey titled: Unemployed Young Pharmacists Survey, between 12 and 21 February via a newsletter publication. This survey aimed to collect data on post-community service pharmacists and their experiences with permanent job acquisition. This survey had a total of 216 participants, 185 of them being PSSA members, 10 who have never been members of the PSSA, and 21 previous members who had either resigned voluntarily or were removed due to non-payment of membership fees.

Young pharmacists had the opportunity to list as many barriers to employment as experienced and/or observed. These are listed in Table I.

One can find oneself asking the following questions from the barriers listed:

1. Is the profession truly saturated? If so, are we monitoring the intake of pharmacy students annually and ensuring that there is a strategic plan in place to permanently absorb them into the healthcare space post their community service year?
2. Many job vacancies (including junior positions) state that they need candidates with at least 2–3 years' experience post-community service. Which begs the question: is time spent completing internship and community service disregarded as experience?

**Table I:** Barriers to finding employment according to young pharmacists

Driver's license, personal transport	Employers' (mis)trust of unstable newly dispensed pharmacists
Differences in dispensing systems	Nepotism, corruption, RP favouritism and bias (pre-filled posts)
Experience in a sector as criteria to submission of application	Post purchasing
Large number of applications, low funding, few vacancies	Internal transfers
Post-freezing	Previous interns/CSP's preference
Bursary holder preference	Saturated market
Applicant Tracking System (ATS) vs CVs	CV structure, interview skills, Z83 form
Relocation costs	"Late" completion of CSP
BEE	Language
Non-negotiable salaries	Pharmacist to Pharmacist's assistant ratio
Over-qualification	Costly additional qualification requirements

3. How can policy-makers monitor the Pharmacist to Pharmacist's assistant ratio ensuring that these ratios are not exploited and young pharmacists are provided increased opportunities for employment?
4. Is post-freezing a reality? How can different stakeholders work together to secure enough funding to absorb young pharmacists?
5. Are we encouraging entrepreneurship among young pharmacists, with sufficient mentorship and funding opportunities?

Experience was the major reason listed in the survey and one can say that whilst it (experience) is the value of a company, it may be a terrifying reality to a young pharmacist.

While urban areas are oversaturated with pharmacists, rural and underserved regions struggle with a critical shortage of healthcare professionals. The importance of rural placements cannot be overstated. From the survey, only 26 respondents were unwilling to move to rural areas due to family responsibilities, safety concerns, and lack of sanitation, easily accessible transport and convenience stores. Other reasons included lack of religious facilities and diet options, distance from major institutions where one can complete post-graduate studies, lack of a support system and mental health challenges. Addressing these disparities requires urgent policy-driven solutions that offer incentives, career development opportunities, and sustainable support for pharmacists in rural areas. The uneven distribution of pharmacists negatively impacts healthcare accessibility, particularly for rural communities where patients already face difficulties obtaining medical care.

Compounding the unemployment crisis are other key factors such as the 2003 regulation allowing non-pharmacists to own pharmacies, initially introduced to expand pharmaceutical services nationwide but has instead concentrated resources in urban centres, where corporate interests thrive, leaving rural communities underserved whilst young pharmacists struggle for employment. It is time to support organisations such as the PSSA's South African Association for Community Pharmacists (SAACP) in their journey of rigorous policy analysis, be informed and vocal about key factors affecting the profession such as this.

From a professional organisation perspective, young pharmacists are encouraged to actively participate in sector and branch activities by attending meetings, contributing to conversations including board notices, attending CPD events and developing a professional network that can mentor and facilitate the development of soft skills, provide sound and experienced advice on practical issues and concerns and ensure wide exposure to opportunities available.

The true identity of a pharmacist is stewardship, not merely dispensing medicine but advocating for patients, ensuring access, and advancing public health. Young pharmacists are encouraged to intelligently advocate and strategise for meaningful change. Their absence due to unemployment affects their personal lives and hampers the healthcare system, as it loses out on their unique contributions to patient care and public health.

Let us not allow unemployment to define us. Instead, let us redefine the profession, ensuring that pharmacists, wherever they are, are recognised, empowered, and able to serve.

Feel free to reach out to us at | Email: [ypg@pssa.org.za](mailto:ypg@pssa.org.za) | Facebook: Young Pharmacists' Group of PSSA | Instagram: @pssaypg  
*Young pharmacists – connected, engaged, empowered and inspired!*

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