



Expanding career horizons for pharmacists: policy, regulation, industry and public health

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Introduction

The pharmacy profession is undergoing a dynamic transformation—both in South Africa and globally. Pharmacists are no longer confined to traditional dispensing roles; they are emerging as influential contributors to health policy, regulatory science, quality assurance, market access, medical affairs, public health, and entrepreneurship. These evolving roles are expanding career opportunities while strengthening healthcare systems and advancing patient safety.

With extensive experience across most sectors of pharmacy, I've seen how pharmacists can drive meaningful change beyond the dispensary. As Chairperson of the Southern Gauteng Branch of the South African Association of Hospital and Institutional Pharmacists (SAAHIP), I have also witnessed how professional bodies empower pharmacists to lead, advocate, and shape the future of our profession.

Pharmaceutical and health policy

Pharmaceutical policy governs medicine accessibility, affordability, and rational use. Pharmacists contribute through technical input, formulary decisions, and advocacy for equitable access. In South Africa, platforms such as the National Essential Medicines List Committee (NEMLC), the Pharmaceutical Society of South Africa (PSSA), and SAAHIP enable pharmacists to influence national health priorities.

SAAHIP plays a pivotal role in representing pharmacists in hospitals and institutional settings. Through its branches and national structures, it fosters professional development, policy engagement, and collaboration. Globally, the World Health Organization (WHO) recognises pharmacists as key stakeholders in universal health coverage, antimicrobial stewardship, and immunisation strategies.

Regulatory affairs and pharmacovigilance

Regulatory affairs ensures that medicines and medical devices meet rigorous standards for safety, efficacy, and quality. Pharmacists play a key role in this space—contributing to product registration, inspections, and compliance both within pharmaceutical companies and at the regulatory authority, SAHPRA. Pharmacovigilance complements these efforts by monitoring adverse drug reactions,

analysing safety data, and identifying risk signals to protect public health and ensure ongoing therapeutic safety.

Quality Assurance (QA)

Quality assurance underpins pharmaceutical manufacturing, distribution, and clinical research. Pharmacists in QA oversee batch release, manage deviations and corrective and preventative actions (CAPAs), and ensure compliance with cGxP such as Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP), Good Distribution Practice (GDP), Good Clinical Practice (GCP). These roles span local distributors to multinational companies and demand precision and a commitment to patient safety.

Market access and health economics

Market access ensures patients benefit from registered therapies. Pharmacists in this field work on pricing, reimbursement, and health technology assessments (HTAs). With National Health Insurance (NHI) on the horizon, pharmacists with expertise in Pharmacoeconomics will be vital in shaping sustainable healthcare financing.

Medical affairs

Medical affairs bridges science and clinical practice. Pharmacists act as therapeutic experts, supporting ethical promotion, clinical data dissemination, and training. Roles such as Medical Science Liaisons (MSLs) involve engaging with healthcare professionals, supporting investigator-initiated studies, and ensuring compliance with the Marketing Code of Practice.

Public health

Pharmacists are well-positioned for public health careers. Beyond dispensing, they contribute to antimicrobial stewardship, health promotion, immunisation programmes, and pharmacoeconomic evaluations. Opportunities exist within the Department of Health, NGOs, and international organisations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and Global Fund.

Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is an exciting frontier for pharmacists seeking to innovate in healthcare. With technical and regulatory expertise, pharmacists are well-placed to identify gaps in service delivery and compliance. Emerging ventures include:

- Pharmaceutical and medical device establishments
- Regulatory and QA consulting practices
- Digital health and wellness platforms

Having founded a medical device establishment myself, I have seen how pharmacists can integrate scientific knowledge with business strategy while maintaining regulatory compliance and driving innovation.

Postgraduate study opportunities

Postgraduate education empowers pharmacists to specialise and take on leadership roles across diverse sectors. South African universities offer programmes that align with the evolving needs of the pharmaceutical industry and public health. Below are some institutions which are offering advanced degrees that can accelerate your career and expand your professional impact:

- University of the Witwatersrand (Wits): Research-based Master of Pharmacy in pharmaceuticals, pharmaceutical chemistry, and pharmacy practice.

- University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN): M. Pharm in Pharmacy Practice, focusing on Pharmacoeconomics and clinical pharmacy services.
- Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University (SMU): Programmes in Clinical Pharmacy, Public Health Pharmacy and Management, and Pharmaceutical Sciences.
- North-West University (NWU): Master of Pharmacy in Pharmacy Practice, with admission based on academic and practical performance.
- University of the Western Cape (UWC) and University of Pretoria (UP): Advanced training in regulatory affairs, public health, and clinical pharmacy.

These programmes open doors to leadership roles in regulation, public health, and clinical practice—locally and internationally.

Conclusion

Pharmacy in South Africa is evolving beyond traditional boundaries. From shaping policy and regulation to driving innovation in industry and public health, pharmacists are redefining their professional identity. By embracing postgraduate education and exploring non-traditional career paths, pharmacists can become architects of healthcare transformation.

The future of pharmacy lies not only in dispensing medicines—but in influencing how they are developed, accessed, and governed. Through associations like SAAHIP, pharmacists can amplify their impact, advocate for systemic change, and lead the profession into a new era of relevance and innovation.