



More than a year of training: The hidden anxiety of Pharmacy Internship

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Pharmacy internship is often described as a year of consolidation, a time to translate theory into practice, build confidence, and prepare for independent professional responsibility. It is presented as a bridge between student-hood and professional identity. While this is true, there is another, less-discussed dimension of internship: the quiet anxiety about what comes next.

For many interns, the year is not only about mastering dispensing accuracy, clinical decision-making or workflow management. It is also about confronting a pressing and often overwhelming question: *Where do I fit within this profession?*

The South African pharmacy sector is diverse and dynamic. Opportunities exist in hospital practice, community pharmacy, industry, academia, regulatory affairs, research, and public health. Yet access to these sectors is not always straightforward. Exposure during undergraduate training can be limited. Internship positions are typically concentrated in hospital or community settings, and positions in alternative sectors may be scarce, competitive or geographically restricted. As a result, many young pharmacists find themselves navigating a narrow pathway while knowing that the profession itself is far broader.

This structural bottleneck creates uncertainty. Interns may aspire to academia but find few entry points. Others may be drawn to industry or regulatory roles but lack networks, mentorship or clear guidance on transitioning. The difficulty is not necessarily a lack of ambition, but a lack of exposure and access. The pathway from internship to specialised or non-traditional sectors can feel opaque.

Beyond career logistics, this uncertainty carries a psychological weight. An internship is a high-responsibility year. Interns are expected to perform competently, adapt quickly, and contribute meaningfully to service delivery. At the same time, they are managing personal transitions, relocation, financial pressures, and the shift into full professional accountability. Layered

onto this is the anxiety of employability and long-term career direction.

Conversations about early-career pharmacy often focus on competence and compliance. We speak about CPDs, examinations, and performance metrics. Less frequently do we acknowledge the internal pressures many interns carry: the comparison with peers who appear to have clear career trajectories, the fear of stagnation or the uncertainty of securing posts after community service. This is not a reflection of weakness; it is a natural response to a competitive and evolving professional landscape.

Recognising this hidden anxiety is not about criticising the system, but about strengthening it. Early-career pharmacists would benefit from structured career guidance embedded within internship and community service programmes. Greater exposure to alternative sectors during undergraduate training could broaden awareness of possibilities. Formalised mentorship platforms linking interns with pharmacists in academia, industry, research, and policy could demystify pathways that currently seem inaccessible.

At the same time, it is important to remind ourselves and our incoming colleagues that uncertainty does not equate to failure. Career paths in pharmacy are rarely linear. Many established professionals did not begin in the sector where they ultimately flourished. Exploration, redirection, and growth are part of professional development.

To the new interns: Welcome! You are joining a field that is resilient, adaptable, and deeply impactful. It is normal not to have every step mapped out. It is acceptable to question, to explore, and to evolve. Your internship is more than a checklist year; it is the beginning of professional self-discovery.

If we, as a profession, acknowledge both the opportunities and the anxieties of this transition period, we can create a more supportive and sustainable pathway for the pharmacists who will shape our future.

Why young pharmacists need each other: The power of the YPG

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The transition from internship to independent practice is one of the most formative phases in a pharmacist's career. It is a period marked by increased responsibility, growing clinical autonomy, and important professional decisions. Yet it can also be isolating. Many young pharmacists move from structured academic environments into workplaces where expectations are high, and support systems vary. In this space, connection becomes essential.

The Young Pharmacists Group (YPG) exists to bridge this gap.

Young pharmacists represent the future direction of the profession. They bring fresh perspectives on technology, public health, patient-centred care, and innovation. However, without platforms for engagement and mentorship, these voices can remain unheard. The YPG provides a structured forum where early-career pharmacists can connect, collaborate, and contribute meaningfully to professional discourse.

One of the most valuable aspects of the YPG is its emphasis on mentorship. The early years of practice are filled with questions that extend beyond clinical guidelines: How do I transition into academia? What steps are required to enter the industry? How do I balance postgraduate studies with full-time work? How can I develop leadership skills? These are questions best answered not only through policy documents but through lived experience shared by seasoned professionals.

A well-structured mentorship programme offers more than career advice. It provides reassurance, professional modelling, and access to networks that might otherwise be difficult to enter. Mentorship reduces the sense of professional isolation and normalises uncertainty. It allows young pharmacists to see that career progression is not a single ladder but a landscape of possibilities.

Beyond mentorship, the YPG creates opportunities for leadership development and advocacy. Engaging in professional

committees, contributing to policy discussions, and participating in national initiatives fosters confidence and a sense of ownership in the profession. When young pharmacists are actively involved, they are not merely recipients of change; they become architects of it.

The YPG also strengthens professional solidarity. Pharmacy practice can vary significantly between sectors and regions. Through networking events, discussions, and collaborative projects, young pharmacists gain insight into diverse practice environments. This cross-pollination of ideas promotes innovation and a broader understanding of the profession's role within the healthcare system.

Importantly, involvement in the YPG signals a commitment to growth. It reflects a willingness to move beyond the minimum requirements of practice and engage in shaping the profession's trajectory. For early-career pharmacists navigating uncertainty about their place within pharmacy, such involvement can be grounding and empowering.

As we consider the challenges facing interns and community service pharmacists from limited sector exposure to career anxiety, organisations like the YPG become even more significant. They provide structure where there may be ambiguity and community where there may be isolation.

Young pharmacists do not need to navigate the early years alone. By participating in the YPG, seeking mentorship, and contributing actively, they invest not only in their own development but in the sustainability of the profession itself.

The strength of pharmacy lies not only in scientific knowledge or regulatory frameworks, but in its people, particularly those willing to support one another. The YPG embodies this principle. It reminds us that while the journey into professional maturity may be complex, it does not have to be solitary.

Feel free to reach out to us at | Email: ypg@pssa.org.za | Facebook: Young Pharmacists' Group of PSSA | Instagram: @pssaypg
LinkedIn: Young Pharmacists' Group of PSSA

Young pharmacists – connected, engaged, empowered and inspired!