



## The unseen pillars: elevating the role of pharmacists in patient care

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As the International Pharmaceutical Federation (FIP) World Congress prepares to convene in Cape Town under the theme “Innovating for the Future of Health Care”, the evolving landscape of healthcare in South Africa brings to light the complex dynamics between pharmacists and other healthcare professionals. This global gathering serves as a backdrop for reflecting on pharmacists and pharmacy practices in our country.

The journey towards integrating pharmacists more fully into the healthcare team in South Africa has been fraught with challenges. Despite their extensive training and expertise in medication management, pharmacists frequently encounter barriers when attempting to expand their roles beyond traditional dispensing duties. Having attended several conferences in the last two months, where conversations still revolved around the inclusion of pharmacists as part of the multidisciplinary team, it was particularly poignant to hear one pharmacist express his anticipation for the day when he, too, would be invited to ward rounds. This sentiment echoes the frustration and eagerness of many pharmacists to fully contribute their expertise to patient care. This tension is palpable in hospital settings, where pharmacists strive to contribute more directly to patient care but may face resistance or lack of understanding from other healthcare professionals. The FIP Congress’s focus on “Advancing Pharmacy Practice” underscores the global recognition of this issue and the need for change internationally.

One cannot help but contemplate the underlying factors contributing to this situation. Historical hierarchies within healthcare, coupled with entrenched perceptions of professional roles, have created an environment where pharmacists’ full potential remains underutilised. The concept of medical dominance, though rarely discussed openly, casts a long shadow over interprofessional interactions. Pharmacists report feeling frustrated, undervalued, and even apprehensive when engaging with doctors, highlighting the emotional toll of these power dynamics. The FIP theme of “Interprofessional Collaboration” directly addresses this challenge, emphasising the need for a more integrated approach to healthcare.

The ongoing PiMART court case, set to be heard at the High Court, exemplifies the struggle for recognition. Pharmacists are advocating for the right to prescribe antiretrovirals (ARVs), with substantial evidence from other countries demonstrating the efficacy and safety of pharmacist-prescribed ARVs. FIP has been actively advocating for

the expansion of pharmacists’ roles in public health. This includes initiatives to integrate pharmacists more deeply into healthcare systems, enabling them to contribute significantly to patient care and public health efforts. For instance, FIP has emphasised the importance of pharmacists in public health through various programs and policy recommendations, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, where pharmacists played a crucial role in maintaining healthcare services and supporting public health measures.

In South Africa, pharmacists are expected to take on expanded roles in primary healthcare, which aligns with FIP’s vision of enhancing the role of pharmacists in public health. This includes providing more patient-centred services and participating in public health initiatives, which could significantly improve health outcomes and alleviate the burden on the healthcare system. The ongoing PiMART court case is in stark contrast with the progressive vision of FIP, which focuses on broadening the scope of pharmacists’ contributions to public health and patient care. The legal battles surrounding PiMART leaves many patients without timely access to ART. Given that only 78.7% of diagnosed individuals are currently on treatment, any delay exacerbates the existing gap. Without PiMART, the already strained public health system may struggle to provide adequate care for the estimated two million people living with HIV who are not on treatment.

FIP’s global #ThinkHealthThinkPharmacy campaign is an important way to achieve this goal. A number of major stakeholders in global health currently recognise pharmacists as healthcare professionals, including the United Nations, the International Labour Organization, the World Health Organization, and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. A wide range of health services, in addition to medicines supply and health advice, are being provided in pharmacies. Nevertheless, the pharmacy profession needs universal recognition of its unique place in primary health care.

Newly graduated pharmacists in South Africa are facing difficulties in finding community service or intern positions, despite the overall lack of pharmacist positions in the country. This issue resonates with the FIP theme of “Workforce Development and Support,” emphasising the need for strategic planning to ensure a sustainable and well-utilised pharmacy workforce. In a memorandum handed over in April 2024 by a group called – ‘Representatives of Unemployed Pharmacists SA’ to various stakeholders, the group called for immediate allocation of

employment and letters of appointment for over 150 post-community service pharmacists in each province. They also called for the absorption of all community service pharmacists upon completion of their service and the filling of vacant positions to ensure a continuous cycle of employment in the public service.

The pending approval of regulations for specialisation in pharmacy by the Minister of Health further illustrates the challenges faced by the profession. This delay in recognising and formalising pharmacy specialisation contrasts with the FIP's emphasis on "Advancing Specialized Pharmacy Services," which recognizes the importance of specialised roles in improving patient outcomes. Specialisation in any profession allows for the deepening of knowledge and expertise within a chosen field. Some hospital groups in the private sector of South Africa have created positions that enable the growth of the pharmacy profession by appointing pharmacists to provide specialised services, these are knowledge driven services such as improving medication safety and efficacy, monitoring drug interactions, and offering specialised dosing assistance. The situation in the public sector, which serves approximately 86% of the South African population, is markedly different. The position of specialised pharmacists remains largely unrecognised and underutilised.

As we contemplate the path forward, it becomes clear that change must occur on multiple fronts. Interprofessional education and collaboration, a key theme of the FIP Congress, are crucial steps towards fostering mutual understanding and respect among healthcare professionals. By creating opportunities for doctors, nurses, and pharmacists to learn and work together during their training, we can begin to break down the silos that have long divided these professions.

The journey towards full recognition and integration of pharmacists as equal healthcare partners in South Africa is ongoing. It requires patience, persistence, and a commitment to excellence from every member of the profession. As we move forward, let us remember that

the ultimate goal is not professional prestige, but improved patient care. By working collaboratively and advocating for their rightful place in the healthcare team, pharmacists can help create a more holistic, effective healthcare system that truly serves the needs of all South Africans.

In this process of change, it is essential to acknowledge that progress may be slow and at times frustrating. However, each step forward, no matter how small, brings us closer to a healthcare system where the unique skills and knowledge of pharmacists are fully recognised and utilised. The FIP World Congress in Cape Town offers a unique opportunity to catalyse this change, bringing global perspectives and best practices to bear on our local challenges. The path ahead may be challenging, but it is one that must be traversed for the betterment of patient care and the advancement of the healthcare profession as a whole.

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