



## Success story of young pharmacists

These success stories are hosted by Mr Kesentseng Jackson Mahlaba, who is a pharmacist and a lecturer. He is a health advocate in vaccine hesitancy, medicine management and rational medicines use in order to improve access to and adherence to medicines by patients and communities at large. He is the current Chairperson of the North Gauteng branch of the South African Association of Hospital and Institutional Pharmacists and a scientific advisor to the South African Vaccination and Immunisation Centre at Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University.

If you want to be hosted to share your success story as a vibrant young pharmacist who has less than 5 years' experience post their internship, please email Kesentseng at kesentseng.mahlaba@smu.ac.za.

### Meet Nicholas Magongwa

***Introduce yourself to the readers of SAPJ so that they have a broader understanding of your journey to this point.***

My name is Nicholas Magongwa. I was born and bred in a small village in Limpopo called Calspruit in Kamagongwa, part of my name. That's it about me, I was raised by a very strong and powerful woman. That's my background.



***Where did you study pharmacy, and what made you choose pharmacy as a career choice?***

I studied pharmacy (BPharm) at Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University (SMU). Then, our BPharm programme was a merger between the University of Limpopo, Medunsa campus, before they changed to SMU, and Tshwane University of Technology. Upon completion of my undergraduate degree, I immediately commenced with my Master of Pharmacy in Clinical Pharmacy at SMU.

***Why pharmacy?*** That's a good question, I was asked the same question during an interview before I started pharmacy. I was always curious regarding how medication works, that is, how absorption in the human body takes place and their overall mechanism of action. These are also the common questions that a lot of people ask. For me, that curiosity in me resulted in me doing a self-reflection to assess if I thought I had the skills and abilities to be a healthcare professional (pharmacist). During this self-reflection period, I had the opportunity to volunteer at a provincial hospital in Limpopo where I was exposed

to what pharmacists do on daily basis, this really fascinated me. The passion grew from there on as I was then convinced that pharmacy is the right direction I should take.

***Most, if not all students, experience obstacles during their study period. What were some of those obstacles for you and how did you go about overcoming them?***

Financial support was my biggest obstacle when I got to university. Fortunately, early in the year I heard about a merit bursary which I qualified for. This bursary is awarded to first year students who are studying towards their first degree after Grade 12 who have an average mark of 70% or higher overall for six subjects (excluding Life Orientation) in Grade 12 final examination. I was fortunate as I had five distinctions in my matric. This bursary alleviated most of my financial anxieties in my first year.

My second obstacle was adjusting moving from my village into university life, especially because I was the first in my family to go to university. Early on, I did not have a mentor to guide me through university lifestyle, academics and everything else in between. Again, I was fortunate to meet a group of young, dedicated students in my class that later became my structure. Most of whom actually went on to get postgraduate qualifications after BPharm. We guided each other not to fall into wrong crowds, always had a clear scheduled plan that kept our aim in front of us.

***They say: If you want to go fast, go alone but if you want to go far, go together. During your time at university, who were some of the people who 'walked with you' to get you to the point of graduation?***

I would like to highlight that the university had a very good supportive structure. In the School of Pharmacy, we had a lecturer called Dr Lindi Zikalala Mabope, she is the Senior Academic Support Co-ordinator for the school. She tracked all students progress and intervened where she saw potential risks in a student that might affect their academics. Her motto was, "no one gets left behind", little did I know, that would be the motto that I live by till today. This also inspired me and my very close-knit group of friends to become mentors and ensure that no one got left behind.

***Coming from an academic environment, how did you experience internship at first and were you able to see how the BPharm degree prepared you for the practice setting?***

When I finished my BPharm I knew that I was going to do an academic internship towards clinical pharmacy. This was extremely challenging for me; I would vouch that the programme I did is one of the most

challenging degrees out there, although the two years just flew by. The programme really propelled my career in ways I had not imagined.

With regards to being ready for the working environment, I have the structure of the BPharm programme in the school of pharmacy at SMU to thank. We did a problem-based learning approach which enforced teamwork, collaboration and self-sufficiency. We had to think outside the box, research information, and do a lot of application. Post my internship, I found myself collaborating a lot with other health disciplines institutions. I feel like I can be placed in any industry in pharmacy and within a few weeks I would have adapted.

***Since completion of internship, how did you advance through the pharmacy profession to this point? What posts and positions followed?***

I completed my two years academic internship (MPharm) in record time with a distinction. I then did my community service in one of the leading Korean companies in the country. Post my community service (during the COVID times), I was employed at a public hospital in Port Elizabeth where I started applying my clinical pharmacy, mostly in the intensive and critical care units and COVID units where I would advise the healthcare team regarding individual patient medication use and review.

From there, I moved on to my current employment where I am appointed as a Pharmacy Networks Manager in a company that is a subcontractor for the biggest closed medical aid in Southern Africa to manage their pharmacy network. My department manages roughly 3 000 pharmacies and close to two million beneficiaries.

***How do your current daily duties and responsibilities compare to what you envisioned a pharmacist doing when you selected pharmacy as a career path?***

Let me start off by saying I planned early on to explore most of the sectors in pharmacy in order to assist me with choosing one that I could be comfortable with and can gain maximum growth for my carrier. Ultimately, I knew I wanted to address health issues at a macro level and maybe even influence policy. Studying clinical pharmacy was a good starting point, as part of my qualification enables me to input on matters such as the Essential Medicine Lists.

So now in my current daily duties and/or responsibilities I drive preventative health in the form of improving or enabling health screening for a number of conditions e.g. diabetes, hypertension, HIV testing. This is achieved through collaboration with various pharmacies and government offices through whom we promote these services that most of them then offer to patients/customers.

Our efforts assisted us in increasing the uptake (screening) by over 200% from where I found it. That is from the number of members that are on our chronic programme, that we want to see going for preventative health care. This approach helps us control, maintain and reduce deterioration of diseases by providing early diagnosis of disease and in the long term, eases the financial burden on the health system. So, as far as my academic training, it excites me to be doing what I studied from undergrad to my post grad.

***How would you define 'success'?***

I know this might sound clichéd, but success for me is not materialistic, my definition is actually quite simple, it is how many people you can take up with you or can be successful through one's interventions. While materials are a nice to have, that is not what I saw when I was exposed to pharmacy before my university years but rather patient care. In any case, I did not see a lot of doctors, pharmacists and lawyers growing up. So, routed in my definition is inspiring others, whether it is one or two people, that is good enough.

***How does your definition of success align or differ from the world's or South Africa's perception of success?***

I think most people measure success based on individuals perceived financial standing in the society. The problem with this is that in most instances, measuring success based on one's wealth results in a shallow version of success, one that lacks compassion and kindness. I think we can all agree that money might make you comfortable, but if you cannot inspire other people, we end up with a society of people who cannot even sustain themselves and most fall in to a culture of dependency.

***Tell us what makes your story a success story, from which readers can tap inspiration from.***

My story is that of many South Africans, humble beginnings (having very little inspiration and few people to look up to) to (to glory in my eyes) leading a pharmacy network for the biggest medical scheme in Southern Africa. A cherry on top for me is managing to pull people with me along the way. I currently have a number of people that I mentor, so what makes my success story for me is not keeping my "success" to myself, but allowing it to enable others.

***Which elements do you think one needs to impact your environment, whether your community, profession, or workplace? Do you believe you have made an impact in pharmacy to-date?***

I think I have made an impact in pharmacy. The field that I am in is very small overall in health and has proven to be illusive for certain races. This has resulted in unequitable societies as most high-level decisions taken are without individuals who are or have been affected by the issues on the table making it hard to tailor interventions. With regards to impacting our environment positively, we need to continue to advocate for the growth of deserving individuals and enable them to become better pharmacists. Pharmacists need to start being fearless and push boundaries.

***What is the ONE thing every reader can contribute to make pharmacy a better profession or more valued by our patients?***

Technology!!! There is one thing I have always been critical of, we (institutions of higher learning, individuals, organisations) need to teach people things that are current as the world is shifting in multiple direction. We are in the fourth industrial revolution, I am even hearing talks of fifth industrial revolution, where the shift is towards technology. It is sad that most pharmacists/pharmacies have not embraced or incorporated technology. Such a move will help

us tremendously in addressing issues of fraud, waste and abuse of systems or services.

We need to make sure that we provide patient-centric healthcare by increasing our collaborations with other healthcare professionals. Also, we (you and I who make up the PSSA) need to advocate for pharmacists and ensure we secure posts at market related packages and also be accountable ourselves towards each other. During my university days I was fortunate to be involved in student organisations e.g. the Sefako Makgatho University Association for Pharmacy Students, the Tshwane University of Technology Association of Pharmacy Students (TUTAPS) and the South African Pharmaceutical Students Federation (SAPSF) to mention a few. My five cents! Pharmacy personnel should be active

in pharmacy organisations and sectors. They help you to network, navigate through the field and exposes you to crucial information.

### ***How would you like to be remembered one day?***

I've said this throughout, and I maintain the same stance, I want to be remembered as someone who has inspired people to become better versions of themselves. Whether it's through bettering their health or their background. I want to be remembered as that person that helped people that needed help. That's what I want my legacy to be. Remember! People remember interactions they had with you, hence, let us be compassionate and kind to each other and make sure we inspire someone through our actions.