

Young entrepreneur fills medical supply gap in rural Africa

After identifying a need for medical consumables and disposables to difficult-to-deliver regions and rural communities across Africa, 20-year old Tony McPherson launched McPherson Trading, a tender based procurement consultancy to help fill this gap.



Tony McPherson, group CEO of McPherson Holdings

Since opening doors in January 2019, the company has serviced countries such as Mali, Malawi, Tanzania, the DRC, Sudan, Somalia, and Yemen, and consigned roughly R30 million worth of stock to date.

Infectious diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis (TB) and HIV have long been some of the world's biggest killers, and according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), African countries still lag far behind the global average in all three.

Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for 93% of malaria-related deaths in the world, while 20.7 million people in East and Southern Africa are living with HIV, with TB accounting for around one in three AIDS-related deaths. Many clinics in rural towns are starved for any sort of medical equipment and supplies needed to treat these diseases.

According to the World Health Body, low-income countries experience poor availability of essential medicines and equipment in health facilities, substandard-quality treatments, frequent stock issues and suboptimal prescription and use of medicines.

“ Africa’s weak supply system has a lot to do with poor procurement practices, lack of storage facilities for pharmaceutical supplies and products, poor transportation systems and inefficient manufacturing capacity. ”

“These issues are particularly extreme in hard to reach rural areas, where large corporations do not regularly operate, so they do not possess expertise on the logistical struggles encountered in these regions. We have managed to make a big difference over the last two years in getting supplies to rural clinics and relief programmes in a timely manner, with demand increasing. Covid-19 has definitely played a role in this demand as well” says McPherson.

McPherson Trading specialises in consumables and disposables such as PPE, needles, syringes, intravenous and arterial lines, sutures, saline and distilled water, wound dressings, and single-use medical equipment.

“ Navigating this business has been tough but there is a dire need to achieve quality healthcare and medical access in African countries. ”

McPherson believes the gap in getting medical supplies to hard-to-reach regions in Africa is nowhere near closed and that it will take a lot of time and financial investment to reach a consistent level of procurement throughout the continent. He cites obstacles like bad roads with severe potholes and vegetation that make it impossible for delivery trucks to reach their destination. In some landlocked areas, crates of supplies must be delivered with helicopters, which is a costly endeavour.

Business runs in the family

The young entrepreneur is also the group CEO of McPherson Holdings which includes the running of his late grandfather’s international pharmaceutical company, EmOx Oxygen, the manufacturer of the world’s only emergency powder-based oxygen. This officially makes McPherson the youngest CEO of an international pharmaceutical company in the world – a title he was awarded at the ARAB Health Conference held in Dubai last year. He attributes successfully maximising supply-chain and logistics across Africa to receiving invaluable guidance from his father, who has been involved in cross-border logistics since the age of 24.

“ I’ve been fortunate to be surrounded by a long line of businessmen and women from whom I could learn from, which has really equipped me with the knowledge needed to overcome the immense challenges of making this business work. ”

McPherson Trading was selected as one the top 20 SMMEs in South Africa.

His passion and effort in helping to improve and provide quality healthcare to communities across Africa has not gone unnoticed. Within only 11 months of founding McPherson Trading, McPherson won the 2019 NSBC Youth Entrepreneur Champion Award, and the company was placed among the top 20 SMMEs in South Africa. Success has been attained by re-investment of funds into the company, streamlining import/export permit processing with an in-house permit controller which has helped to drastically decrease delivery times and building an extensive network of service providers.

“What’s promising is that many of the programmes running in the areas we service have realised the ease with which they can expand their efforts with a more efficient supply chain in place. The long-term goal for us is expansion, and to eventually open local branches in the communities we serve, so that we can eliminate having to buy internationally. I would also like to become accredited to supply a larger variety of products, supplies and medications,” says McPherson.

Advice to young entrepreneurs

McPherson shares his tips/advice to other young entrepreneurs:

- **Throw yourself into the deep-end**

The human instinct is to swim, not to sink. I can confidently say that most young entrepreneurs will find their niche and end up succeeding in whatever industry they throw themselves into, within the first three years. People need to remember, sustainable businesses that focus on longevity are not built overnight.

- **Avoid debt**

My biggest piece of advice to any aspiring entrepreneur is to start small and grow at the pace in which your cash flow allows. You do not have to get into debt to make money. Anything is achievable without loans, credit cards, and overdraft facilities if you start small.

One of my mentors, Penny Streeter OBE, has always said to me – ‘never buy anything you cannot afford cash.’ To this day, I make use of this principle across all my businesses.

- **Find you niche market**

The most successful companies are those which operate in a niche market that is not overcrowded with competition. Offer a product or service that no one else does. Within every industry there is always a niche, and most of the time you will not find it if you are looking. You need to stumble upon it as a problem that needs a solution.

- **Do things properly**

If you are going to do something, do it properly from the get-go or you are wasting your time. Things like compliance, taxation, and SOP's need to be in place from the start. If not, it will haunt you later.

- **Be your own cheerleader**

As an entrepreneur you need to be able to self-motivate. There are going to be times when others will not always agree with you or understand your decisions and that is when you need to trust your instinct.

- **Set goals**

Learn to be goal-orientated. Set daily goals, weekly, monthly, quarterly, yearly goals, etc. Do not be afraid to reward your efforts every now and again when you reach your goals. It is important to look after yourself, too.

- **Network**

It is so important to network. Take every opportunity to go to conferences, events, and seminars. Word of mouth is still one of the best forms of advertising.

- **Hire the right team**

When the time comes to hire assistance, make sure you have the right people working for you, as they are ultimately working towards your company goals. Encourage your team to have their own professional goals too. This will motivate

your employees and build long-standing teams.

- **Take time off**

Being an entrepreneur is not a 9 to 5 job. It is not how the movies portray it: glamorous business trips, private jets and meeting influential people for lunch. It is blood, sweat, tears, and many curse words.

It is probably the hardest working job in the world. Your brain is constantly running on overtime, you are always busy, and you will burn yourself out. You need to reset, relax and breath otherwise you will age beyond your years.

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