

Your pharmacist, your friend

By  Danette Breitenbach

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For many people their pharmacist is the first healthcare professional they seek out when they are experiencing health issues. Seen as more than someone dispensing medicine, whether it be allopathic, naturopathic, or homeopathic, their pharmacist is their friend.



Saul Helman, a responsible pharmacist from Alpha Pharm Pharmacies assists a client (supplied by Alpha Pharm Pharmacies)

Pharmacy Day, on 25 September, highlights the importance of medication in our lives, but also the importance of the pharmacist, especially in the context of Covid-19.

Saul Helman, a responsible pharmacist from Alpha Pharm Pharmacies, says Covid-19 impacted them as frontline healthcare workers on different levels.

“We never knew lockdown ourselves and fears of taking the virus home during the hard lockdowns were real.”

He adds that it was a major challenge staying healthy and safe. “Not only for the pharmacists. Non-medical staff were affected just as much as the medical staff.”

Psychological effects

“Our biggest challenge in lockdown and with Covid-19 is dealing with the psychological effects of the pandemic,” says Helman.

However, he says that knowing their clients so well enabled them to gauge their levels of anxiety and discuss their issues accordingly.

“People really wanted to talk and feel that their fears were recognised. More importantly they wanted to be comforted and told that they would be all right,” he says.

“We had to deal with people losing their jobs, businesses, homes and watched as our customers broke down before our eyes when this occurred. We were, and still are, there to comfort them, listen to their stories and give emotional support where we can,” he explains.

The most difficult and heart-wrenching part of their daily routine, he says was the consoling and supporting the loved ones of those that succumbed to the pandemic.

“Children who lost both parents, husbands, wives, grandparents and children. The heaviness that we carry as we watch this all happening is so deep as these people were not just customers, they were family too,” he says.

Economic impact

Covid-19 affected pharmacies economically as well.

A pharmacy's best months are the winter months as the sales of cold and flu medication as well as antibiotic sales increase immensely.

“Due to lockdown and schools being closed, the usual “flu” spread dwindled, and these sales plummeted, so although we traded and were open, our businesses were certainly affected financially,” says Helman.

The basket of goods that were sold differed as the Covid cocktails were extremely popular, for example Vitamin C, Vitamin D, Zinc, and immune boosters.

“Day-to-day trading became more about deliveries as people didn't want to venture out of their homes even though pharmacy visits were permitted. Telephonic consultations became the norm,” he explains.

To support their pharmacy staff, not only with supplied with personal protective equipment (PPE), face shields, hand sanitisers, and perspex visors for our dispensary, pay points and layout plans to assist in social distancing, Alpha Pharm Pharm launched Parkmacy.

“This concept was introduced to afford customers the luxury to contact their preferred Alpha Pharm Pharmacy to place their order, get it prepared and delivered to their cars outside the pharmacy and atone on a sanitised credit card machine,” explains Helman.

Role of the pharmacist

“Our profession is the custodian and gate-keeper to medication. One forgets that medication in any form is a chemical and has effects on the body. Our bodies can respond and react positively to medication if used correctly and negatively if used incorrectly,” he explains.

“It is our job and duty to discuss the effects of the medication with our patients and customers, and to advise on both the positive and negative effects, drug interactions, and the correct use of medication,” says Helman.

“We provide easy access for the public to discuss their health issues and can recommend Over-The-Counter (OTC) medication or advise them to seek further medical attention,” he says.

Having a full history of which medications a customer has used allows them to recommend and advise on how to use which medications and when to use them. But it is not only about selling medication but looking after the wellbeing of our customers and patients holistically.

“Often the complaint that the customer gives us is merely a front for a more troubling and serious ailment and knowing the customer helps us direct our conversation to those issues, to get the best treatment and medical advice for them,” he adds.

“The commemoration of Pharmacy Day allows the general public to express gratitude for the important role the pharmacist and pharmacy play in their day-to-day lives as we are easily accessible, no appointments required, and provide free professional healthcare advice,” says Helman.

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