

Ladders have been placed against the wrong walls

After 30 years on the register, you can, I hope, forgive a little reflection on some changes seen during that time. I expect, like me, you sometimes wonder why on earth you became a pharmacist. There were never, as far as I am aware, any other pharmacists in my family so there was no family pressure or history repeating itself. I had enjoyed chemistry at school, but thought a degree in that subject alone would be far too narrow. Pharmacy did seem an attractive option because it was a broad, and, perhaps more importantly, a practical subject. A visit to any pharmacy was accompanied by strange smells as concoctions were made and “real” dispensing was done. But, was my becoming a pharmacist a good decision? Sufficient to say that I am pleased to say neither of my children has followed in my footsteps.

It was not long after securing a university place before I had serious doubts. Before starting university I had arranged a six-week summer job at a local pharmacy in my hometown in the midlands. No gap year in those days! The manager was barely 10 years my senior and was already bored with “retail” as it was called then. It was not an auspicious start. His advice was for me to go into the pharmaceutical industry for the variety, if nothing else.

This career advice theme was continued at university. We were advised to pursue a career in academia, hospital pharmacy or “the industry”. For some reason, our lecturers frowned upon the “trade” end of pharmacy. It had a dubious image because of selling everything from hot water bottles to cosmetics, from offering photographic services to home brewing kits. So, in 30 years, not much has changed there then, and must still be a major factor as to why pharmacists are not taken particularly seriously except by themselves. The other is the continuous bickering between

various factions, which we still see with the Society’s Council. The original perceived advantage of the breadth of opportunity that pharmacy offered seems to be the reason too for it to continually try to self-destruct.

So, what has gone wrong? There was a time when pharmaceutical input was necessary. There was a need to actually prepare something, not simply order it ready made from a “specials” unit, or pick an original pack off a shelf. After that change an attempt was made to justify pharmacists’ existence by placing great emphasis on knowledge and advice, on being the bare foot — let us be blunt — second rate doctor with a limited repertoire. Was this a good idea? — I think not. In these days of internet access, patients come armed with too much information and too many facts as any GP will tell you. Far better to use an information scientist to distil facts. As for limited prescribing, the public place more confidence in nurses for there to be many opportunities here. In the pharmaceutical industry, which now apparently bemoans the lack of pharmacists, a great opportunity was lost by not fighting to ensure all Qualified Persons (who release all batches of product for sale) were pharmacists. By allowing others to take on that role the unique knowledge base of pharmacists became a myth.

I read a management book recently about how easy it is to place your ladder against the wrong wall. To me that is exactly what pharmacists have done. When the role had to change because traditional manipulative skills were not required in the dispensary, the ladders were placed against the information/patient advice/limited prescribing walls, and we have been trying to climb those ill-placed ladders ever since. This is not where pharmacists’ unique skills lay and we have been paying for that mistake ever since. — *Contributed*.