

## Review Article

### Anecdotes from a Septuagenarian Pharmacy Professional

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Revised: 23 May 2019; Accepted: 31 August 2019

#### ABSTRACT

The author commenced his Bachelor of Pharmacy undergraduate studies abroad in the year 1968. It was another three decades wait for the commencement of pharmacy degree programs in our country, Sri Lanka. As a result of the commitment to the ever-absorbing subject of pharmacy and being receptive to the wider concepts in education many anecdotes are lingering in the author's mind. There is much more to a successful professional carrier than the subject matter alone. Experience is said to be accumulated labor that provides speedy solutions to problems for which the inexperienced will have to team up for costly investigations. Those that inspire are shared with the readers.

**Key words:** 5Ms; Language power; Punctual; Death penalty; HIV.

#### Life time school day lessons on 'full stops' and when to say 'No':

i. In the primary school during an English lesson a topic was given for an essay. One and a half page answer was submitted for marking. It was returned during the following lesson. The lady teacher had marked angry circles at the end of each of the first ten sentences for missing full stops, awarding 0/10 and had stopped marking any further. It created such an impression on me that it is impossible to skip without a full stop being placed wherever they deserve.

ii. When our young school principle returned from England after an MA degree in the early 1960s he brought a brand-new sports bicycle, maroon colored, cable breaks with pads on rim sides, stylish curved handles, a sensation in the town. You tend to keep such possessions

spotless. He narrated the following in the school assembly. It was a rainy day and he was taking extra care while riding not to splash muddy water on the bike. A friend approached him and asked for a ride. He knew well that the friend was still learning to ride but had no courage to refuse. He got on the bike, rode some distance swaging all the way and finally fell in a ditch full of muddy water scratching the bike, a disaster under the circumstances. His advice was when you are convinced in the negative, you have to be bold enough to say 'NO'.

#### Outlook of being a pharmacy student:

i. During early undergraduate days my understanding about pharmacy was that it is all about dispensing drugs. When students had to undertake laboratory, work related to Chemical and Mechanical Engineering it looked



somewhat out of place. Demonstrations in laminar and turbulent fluid flow patterns, power consumption of a jaw crusher and drawing a cross section of a tap are still fresh in my mind. However, this exposure oriented me towards industrial pharmacy which I chose to pursue. Those days it was said that the industry runs on 3Ms, men, materials and machines, currently it has 5Ms, methods and money added.

ii. While walking down the campus with a post graduate student he abruptly stopped and asked, what are you going to do with your degree? I was not ready with an answer. Without wasting time, he said, once you go out looking for a carrier, tell them 'Here I am, a graduate from the ABC University, displaying the degree certificate held high and ask, do you want me or not?' He probably hinted that one has to live up to the worthiness of his degree and stand up to professional demands by himself.

#### **Endurance unlimited, final check of a PhD thesis:**

A PhD candidate having compiled his dossier casually approached his supervisor to get an appointment for the final check before submission. It was late afternoon. 'Come with me' said the supervisor and went in to his staff quarters. Candidate by the side he started perusing the dossier quite casually. It was time for evening tea but no hint about the appointment. They had the tea break and soon the review commenced. It went on until it was time for dinner which the supervisor shared with the student. The student remained trapped and no end in sight on the process. Now it is past mid night. There was a coffee break and

then again back to the review process. By now it was day break and the student was served with breakfast. It took some more time and the dossier check was completed. The student was released following the uninterrupted overnight check. This is the bench mark for those who may falter as the midnight approaches.

#### **Merit of other professions:**

i. Our hostel had students from a variety of disciplines, science and medicine assuming pride over others. Now and then there were arguments. Pharmacy (P) to Management (M), 'Look at the wonder drugs that are being discovered. Then again, the nuclear science and atom bombs, India too suspected of possessing nuclear capacity'. M to P, 'Well, that may be so, but see that you wait for the green light from the management (political) to go ahead with the nuclear test'. In India, the first nuclear test hold up was over five years already by then. Sometime later (1971) there was news that first underground explosion was conducted, unusual silence in the hostel, quite a few seen in tears of pride?

ii. On the way to Sri Lanka by train leaving 8.30 p.m. in a 48 hour journey then, the passengers were retiring to sleep. Not caring for a conversation, I happened to see eye to eye of a somewhat elderly looking gentleman in the opposite third tire sleeper. He smiled at me and asked 'where are you travelling to?' I said Sri Lanka. He said 'Ah, I had a very good Sri Lankan PhD candidate one Mr. Xxx under me'. I then realized he should be a professor of languages (PL) which he confirmed. I decided for a close dialogue imagining that he may not have answers to my questions. Self: Can I ask a question from you Sir? PL: Oh, sure. Self:

Now if you have a severe headache there is no denying that you need to take a pain killer. So this is proof that the society needs the services of the pharmacy profession. Now, how can the society benefit from a carrier in languages? PL: Very good question. You see I am travelling to Chennai and from there to Bangaluru. We are coordinating an international multilingual dictionary. Five out of twelve volumes have been completed and this trip is in connection with the sixth volume. Looking at me he asked 'Does that answer your question?'

Thoroughly humbled I nodded my head. His message was that it is the language that powers pharmacy or any other subject for that matter.

#### **Pharmacy misadventure:**

One evening after returning from work I was seated in the drawing room. I could see the gentleman (A) next door coming out and looking around shading his eyes with the hand. I suspected some difficulty with his vision and walked up to him. Self: What is the problem with you? A: I can't see properly. The light is too bright. Self: Since when do you have it? A: I went for an eye check. They instilled some medicine in to my eyes. After that only I started experiencing this difficulty. Self: You are in for a serious problem. Immediately go to the hospital. A: No, I will go there tomorrow. Self: Tomorrow will be too late. You probably will be blind by then. Go to the hospital immediately. A: I have to get dressed up. Self: No time to get dressed up. Leave immediately in home clothes. Next day I learnt that the doctors have said he had come just in time, his vision had been saved but 10 % of the visual field had been already damaged permanently

by then as a result of excessive intraocular pressure due to medication.

#### **Disposition towards industry:**

i. Having appointed as the production manager of a foreign funded brand new pharmaceutical manufacturing facility I told myself 'this is a gift of a five-star facility with the latest sophisticated machines for a willing technology contestant' and that there is no place on earth like a modern manufacturing facility. Although it may have appeared to others that so and so is exerting himself no end, for me it was like holidaying with the entire pharmacy syllabus opening up before me in a live theatrical show. End of each working day, you are as energetic as at the beginning and the entire staff in all smiles. When the raw materials started arriving at one point we had to look for additional space. Self: This is a new issue. Administration Manager (AM): Don't worry, there you see the lobby. We can use it. Self: No, you can't, this is where we receive visitors. AM: Don't forget that we are a third world country. Self: You may be in the third world. I am not. We are in a first world facility and no less. (AM) At an earlier occasion said, 'We'll recruit some GCE O/L workers to run the place. Self: If that is your position, you better run it yourself, not me. On both issues, my stand prevailed with two GCE A/L Science passes as the minimum qualification for recruitment.

ii. A stock of imported hard empty gelatin capsules had many units getting rejected as they failed to open up in the vacuum operated fully automatic capsule filling machine. Few days later an investigation team arrived. They were to determine if the capsules or the

machine is at fault. The production, quality control and maintenance managers were supporting them. The application to the probe was so intense that they refused morning tea break, then the lunch break and also the afternoon tea break and we too had to be with them. The process ended at 7.15 p.m. signing a hand-written document stating that the problem was due to defective capsules. Looking back, one cannot recall what was so intense about the investigation which did not permit taking away even few minutes for nearly eleven hours. Only when we signed off it was realized that all three managers had not taken their lunch as the lunch boxes were still unopened.

#### **Punctual in the beginning and punctual in the end:**

i. During undergraduate days in India whenever there was a holiday I contacted the university placement officer to arrange for a training session in a manufacturing facility. On a Monday, I was to report to a manufacturing facility in the city suburb. On my way to the factory just about a minute late I saw factory workers from the bus in front rushing in to the factory trying to catch up with the signing time. At the entrance, there was an officer (O). Self: Good morning. I am the trainee from University of ABC, presenting the letter of appointment. O: At what time you are supposed to report? Self: 8 O'clock. O: What is the time now? Self: 8. 03 a.m. O: Why are you late? Self: I was not familiar with the bus routes. O: What were you doing during the week end? You should have checked all that beforehand. Saying there is no one to attend to me, he disappeared. Self: Will I not stand a chance to undertake training? Few minutes

later the officer came back asking me to go and see a particular person for help with a stern warning that I should never get late from now on. This was an unforgettable lesson on punctuality and countering evasive answers.

ii. Past evening tea break labor union made a representation requesting closure of the factory an hour earlier on account of a railway strike. After some bargaining decision was made to close 45 minutes early and the word quickly spread. One by one the operations were shut down. The workers lined up to sign the register. Suddenly the director (D) appeared and inquired as to what was happening. I explained about the rail strike, difficulties in reaching homes and other trivia by which time another 15 minutes had lapsed. D: You are not authorized to close down the factory in this manner. Ask the workers to get back to where they were and start operations. Self: Now there is hardly any time to commence work. D: There is a good half an hour. Self: We start shut down process 15 minutes ahead of signing off time and only 15 minutes work is possible. D: Never mind, ask them to return to their work stations and pretend to work if actual work is not possible. Self: Announced to the workers, 'Factory will be closed at 5. 00 p.m. as usual, get back and start working. No negotiations possible'. They all slowly went back, as predicted by the D, pretended to work in that little while and the factory was shut down as usual at 5.00 p.m.

#### **Visually disabled in the pharmaceutical industry:**

One day there was news about the recruitment of a visually disabled (VD) person to our facility following a government request to the

industry. Everyone was surprised. I myself was concerned in that there are tiny letters in many pharmaceutical labels, appearance checks of materials are endless and one even has shadowless lighting of prescribed brightness so that no chances are left for visual error. However, the overbearing truth is that we have to take care of the weaker sections of the society. One fine day this person reported to work. After few validation checks of his abilities, he was assigned to the stores to check if all the packs are there in a shipper before dispatch. The years went by, he got married and had two children. One Monday morning we saw him and asked 'Hello Lmn, how are you? (VD): I am keeping fine. Q. How did you spend your week end? (VD): I went to see a movie. The surprising answer disabled us from any further questioning wondering what he would see in a movie. Apparently, he enjoys the dialogue, background music and songs to the fullest. To this day he has not made a mistake in his assignments.

By the way there was another worker who could not accurately tell how many different colored toothbrush handles each had been molded at the end of the day. One wondered as to how he had managed with such poor arithmetic. Later it was revealed that this person was colorblind.

### **Playing with fire:**

I could see through the frosted glass partition separating the laboratory a worrying orange colored glow alternatively increasing and decreasing in intensity every 6 -10 seconds. Not having experienced anything of the kind I quickly rushed to the laboratory. There were few analysts surrounding a beaker containing

ethanol 1/3<sup>rd</sup> full that had caught fire. They were merrymaking in rhyme with the unusual flame that increased in intensity for a while and decreasing next moment. I figured out quickly that the fire enlarged until the oxygen inside the beaker was consumed, then slowly diminished and once fresh air is sucked in it intensified again in a cycle. Sensing any moment, the beaker may burst spreading alcohol along with the fire on wooden table, a flat porcelain piece was placed on the beaker to deprive fresh air. The fire extinguished soon preventing a potential large-scale fire.

### **Explosions do happen:**

During an advisory assignment, there came across a granulation process with two workers in attendance. Self: What is this product? A: A steroid hormone tablet. Self: How do you incorporate the active ingredient? A: Opening the lid of a stainless-steel vessel it was said that the steroid is dissolved in 20 L of ethanol and this solution will be used as the granulating agent. This is as good as 20 L of gasoline. To impress on the seriousness, I said to the officers we shall go to the furthest point in the factory floor and then discuss the issue. To the operators I said you are on a deadly assignment, I have no authority but talk to the management and refrain from undertaking the process. Self: Never must such inflammable substances be handled in this manner. You got to have flame proof facilities and machines for safety. I am objecting in the strongest terms and urge you to immediately terminate the manufacture of the product using ethanol. A: We are half way through the process and alcohol had been dispensed for a second batch too. Self: Do not plead with me. In the event of an explosion glass debris from window panes

may even injure people on the road side. They took the risk and completed the second batch as well but no more.

Three months after I left the organization they have reverted to ethanol granulation. One day during lunch interval having only a skeleton staff, just when the others were coming back from the canteen to the manufacturing area an explosion had occurred injuring few workers, ceiling and partitions collapsing. Had it been during regular hours there could have been fatalities.

#### **Artists in manufacture:**

During school days, I remember how an irate art master criticized a student about a clumsy drawing of a crown of a coconut tree. He said 'If you can't see the details of a coconut tree you can't see the details in a slide under the microscope'. I said to myself 'there doesn't seem to be a difference between art and science'? In one of the factories, three operators were exceptionally talented over the others, the latter often seeking the advice from the three. After a long watch, it was realized that each one of them excelled in arts- one in electric organ, next in Kandyan dancing and the third island female magic champion.

#### **Medical errors and pharmaceutical errors:**

i) Medicines are said to stand as the last gate of the therapeutic process - examination, testing, diagnosis, surgery, prescription, dispensing and consuming of the drug. Post open heart surgery patients are known to have died as a result of defective intravenous infusions. The failure of the medicine is a cumulative waste of the entire process. One must also remember that there are many instances of a single

medical or surgical intervention followed by error free lifelong drug therapy.

ii) In Sri Lanka only the pharmacy profession is required a public apology notified in print media about court sentences. Death penalty too is mandated under Poison, Opium and Dangerous Drugs Ordinance. Why is this seriousness about the pharmacy profession? It is said that a medical error costs one life at a time whereas pharmaceutical error can cost many lives. Most often these are not realized until much damage and many years have lapsed. 'Thalidomide disaster', 'clioquinol optic nerve damage', 'cisapride heart block' and 'primaquine toxicity' are some examples. The most devastating in this regard is the ongoing controversy over the spread of HIV in to humans from chimpanzees from which the kidneys were obtained to prepare polio vaccine at the time of its discovery. Google search above terms within inverted commas and under 'polio vaccine and aids' for many topics on each of the issues.

#### **Quotations that helped the author:**

a. During an anatomy demonstration a professor has said to the students when they failed to spot an organ, 'What the mind does not know, the eye doesn't see'.

b. 'If you can't shine like the moon shine like a star'. Provides scope for the majority to become experts in their chosen areas.

c. 'Never to hurry and never to cease'. This is the best attitude for long term success. On the merit of this the author was able to publish a paper 19 years after conducting experiments.

d. 'Over enthusiasm kills'. Enthusiasm is a healthy attitude but overenthusiasm is counterproductive. Many tend to give up

altogether when things do not happen at the expected pace. Lots of good work is lost due to overenthusiasm which could have been attended to in a late second or third round.

e. 'Science is the preparation for life, art is life itself'. This may be the reason why artists are remembered but rarely the name of an engineer or pharmacist, except two pharmacists for the records, Dobereneir of Triads fame in the evolution of periodic table and Pemberton in formulating Coca Cola.

**Conclusion:**

One has enough prospects for character development within the working environment as evident under a variety of topics discussed in the article. Topics on "Visually disabled" and "Artists in manufacture" are of particular

interest. Professions and industries are not necessarily mere academic entities. These are civilizations though we tend to forget the often repeated term "Industrial Civilization" universally acknowledging this fact. Most successful professionals carry a strong element of philosophy in them.

The material presented here may inspire the readers in taking balanced and measured decisions in their carriers rather than spontaneous decisions. Finally given the array of subjects that constitute pharmacy profession, pharmacists are most privileged to be able to view many aspects of life from the point of view of medicine, engineering, chemistry, mathematics, public relations, economics, administration, law and ethics.