PIASA NEWS

Sales Forces to Receive Boost from Pharmaceutical Learnership Programme

Acute skills shortages and the challenge of meeting employment equity (EE) targets have led members of the pharmaceutical industry to take up the challenge of growing their skills base by offering programmes which would benefit recruits and companies alike.

To actively drive skills development, a working group of pharmaceutical companies including Novartis, BMS, MSD and Schering-Plough, are leading the way in broadening the pool and improving the quality of candidates entering the industry.

The companies are drawn from three pharmaceutical bodies - Pharmaceutical Industry Association of South Africa (PIASA), Innovative Medicines South Africa (IMSA) and Labour Affairs Association of the Pharmaceutical Industry (LAAPI).

The latter being the body which started the lobbying process in order to obtain buy-in and participation of several key players in this initiative.

As a result of this dedication, a new National Certificate in Pharmaceutical Sales (NQF 5-qualification) will be launched in 2010.

The 12-month learnership programme will train graduates identified by employers to fill the EE gap.

Learners will earn a salary while undergoing three training phases written by the industry for the industry - the foundation phase, consisting of formal theoretical learning; a practical component to receive real life work experience; as well as learning the soft skills of the business.

> Graduates will be fully equipped to communicate effectively with health professionals

The objective is to recruit 25 learners a year, nationwide, over the next five years.

Helen Talbot from MSD and one of the founders of the programme explained, "A successful pilot study was conducted with 15 learners in Gauteng to assess the effectiveness of this learnership programme.

"All 15 graduates from the initial programme have been absorbed by the industry. A new curriculum has been approved and the programme registered with SAQA (South African Quality Assurance).

"It is likely that the South African Pharmacy Council will apply to become the ETQA for this qualification."

On completion of the programme, graduates will be fully equipped to communicate effectively with health professionals. They will be able to demonstrate an understanding of disease states and drug action in the body and will also be able to formulate a business plan based on an analysis of market data.

They will be able to evaluate and utilise appropriate support materials to achieve a competitive advantage.

Abdoel Mohammad, a BSc graduate who completed the pilot programme, agreed that the accredited programme addresses EE and definitely provides the appropriate tools required for the training of a pharmaceutical representative.

"Upon completion of the programme, I felt comfortable with the skills and knowledge I had acquired through this opportunity. I felt confident going out into the field for the first time. Even though the selected candidates were diverse in terms of culture and educational background, the playing field was leveled and every one of us left the programme with the same high-level knowledge.

"The programme pushes learners to perform well due to the fact that the course is performance based."

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Renee Hurter of Schering-Plough said, "Pharmaceutical companies stand to benefit from effectively creating a pool of highly qualified employees to feed the entire industry, even if employees cross over from one company to another during their career development.

"A longer-term spin-off of the programme will be to address the skills shortage experienced at middle-management level."

For more information, contact:
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Honoured for Contribution to Industry

Maureen Kirkman, a pharmacist, has been awarded the Honorary Life Membership of PIASA for her enormous contribution to the organisation and to the pharmaceutical industry as a whole. She has spent almost her entire working life in the pharmaceutical industry; the last 11 years as Head: Scientific and Regulatory Affairs at the Pharmaceutical Industry Association of South Africa (PIASA).

Maureen Kirkman, awarded Honorary Life Membership of PIASA

Vicki Ehrich, CEO of PIASA, proudly stated: "Maureen has had many years of broad-based experience in the pharmaceutical industry in both multinational and local companies, where she has spent a good deal of time analysing the effect of increasingly complex legislation and regulations on the pharmaceutical business environment and responding to the issues.

"She has also held positions in various prominent industry bodies and committees including serving as a member of the PIASA SciTech committee. She has also participated in a number of different specialist working groups over many years. Some of her most recent efforts at PIASA have included serving as a member of the industry steering committee for the South African Marketing Code for Medicines and as a member of the Academy of Science of South Africa's panel, looking at revitalising clinical research in South Africa."

Maureen now works as a consultant to the industry and its associated organisations.

Ehrich said, "In bestowing the Honorary Life Membership on Maureen, PIASA acknowledges not only her efforts, but also her remarkable achievements."

Vigilance Needed to Ensure Safety of Medicines

Modern medicines have improved the way in which diseases are managed and controlled.

However, despite all the benefits, mounting evidence indicates that adverse reactions to medicines are a common, yet often preventable cause of illness, disability and sometimes death.

Mechanisms for evaluating and monitoring the safety of medicines in clinical use are necessary. In practice, this means having a well organised pharmacovigilance reporting system in place.

Ongoing safety surveillance is critical to the safe use of medicines in real world settings, where issues such as individual medical history, diet and concomitant medication may impact on individual patient responses.

The World Health Organisation defines pharmacovigilance as the science and activity relating to the detection, assessment, understanding and prevention of adverse effects or any other medicine-related problem.[1]

While all innovative medicines are tested under clinical trial conditions, the nature of a clinical trial means that a limited number of selected individuals are involved.[2]

Some adverse effects only come to light after the controlled study has ended and the product is used in larger populations, where interactions with diet and other medication may lead to possible adverse effects.

"Health professionals are in the best position to report suspected adverse drug reactions (ADRs) observed in their every day patient care.

"Therefore, all healthcare providers such as medical practitioners, pharmacists, nurses and dentists should report ADRs as part of their professional responsibility, even if they may be doubtful about the precise relationship with the given medication," explained Nanette

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O'Connor from the Pharmacology Division at the NADEMC.

Kirti Narsai, Head of Scientific and Regulatory Affairs at PIASA (Pharmaceutical Industry Association of South Africa), agreed that pharmaceutical companies and healthcare providers need to continually contribute to this body of knowledge in order to ensure safe medicine use.

"PIASA's pharmacovigilance working group, with representation from member pharmaceutical companies, carries the responsibility of staying abreast of pharmacovigilance reporting and promoting the use of international pharmacovigilance reporting standards in Africa," she said.

Pharmaceutical companies play an active and important role in the reporting of ADRs. Any adverse drug reaction should immediately be reported to the pharmaceutical company responsible for the marketing of the product in question, which in turn has a responsibility to report this to the NADEMC and to their corporate headquarters for review.

Quality-related issues should also be reported as they may lead to adverse events.

PIASA member companies take their responsibility to build a body of knowledge for the products they research and develop very seriously.

Narsai concludes by explaining the importance of pharmacovigilance reporting: "It remains important at three levels: Corporate responsibility to maintain a company's reputation, ethical responsibility to ensure patient safety and legal responsibility to the South African Department of Health in terms of international codes and standards."

References

1. World Health Organisation. The importance of pharmacovigilance: safety monitoring of medicine products. Accessed on 14 September 2009. Available at: http://apps.who.int
2. World Health Organisation. Pharmacovigilance: ensuring the safe use of medicines. Accessed 14 September 2009. Available at: http://apps.who.int.

For further information, contact the NADEMC on 021-447-1681.