



Rania Cassar-Awe, director,
Retail Strategy, GenMed,
Pfizer, Canada

CAR

“Pharmacists are seeing much more clearly that the patient before them is a customer in the truest sense of the word, not just a person with a prescription.”

Q&A

RANIA CASSAR-AWE CAME TO PFIZER FROM A BACKGROUND IN BIOCHEMISTRY. SHE HAS WORKED ON DIFFERENT TYPES OF EQUATIONS AND FORMULAS SINCE JOINING THE COMPANY OVER 20 YEARS AGO HAVING WORKED IN A NUMBER OF DIFFERENT ROLES, INCLUDING DIRECTOR OF LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT. TODAY, AS DIRECTOR, RETAIL STRATEGY, OF GENMED, A DIVISION OF PFIZER, SHE IS LEADING GENMED, PFIZER CANADA'S RETAIL GENERICS BUSINESS.

CREATIVE CARPENTRY

Pfizer provides new tools for the pharmacist's toolbox

BY JANE AUSTER

PHOTOS BY DAVID SIMARD

PB: What does your role entail?

RANIA CASSAR-AWE: Pfizer has several business units focused on different therapeutic areas. One business unit is focused on what we call the established products; I like to call them “the Pfizer classics,” the tried and trues. Within that unit, we have the original brands and the generics – oral solids or injectables. Anything in the retail space, like oral solids, is my responsibility. My customers are pharmacies and retail pharmacists across the country.

How is pharmacist education changing? We seem to be seeing a lot more specialization, and the bar seems to be getting higher and higher.

From that perspective, it’s an exciting time. People have referred to the past couple of years as an anxious time, but we are getting past that now. There are new opportunities for pharmacists

“Today, learning is part coaching, part formal education, part e-learning, part networking in our modern digital life.”

pursuing growth. The new changes may require specialization, but there is also a kind of breadth emerging for pharmacy. Pharmacists can now face the patient more directly, and in that sense apply a more robust skillset for patient care. For individual pharmacists it’s a time to take their skillset to the next level.

The first part of the change is having the courage to take the leap. First, are you willing, and then, are you able? A segment of pharmacists in the past may have been unwilling, but I sense that now there is a much greater appetite for new roles. Pharmacists are saying, “someone, help me.”

The second part is to look to non-traditional sources because new solutions are required. There’s not one channel anymore; today resources are increasingly available. But you can’t wait for



someone to bring them to you. Success requires reaching out to people, asking for mentors, connecting with peers, also seeking out more formal data and information. Today, learning is part coaching, part formal education, part e-learning, part networking in our modern digital life.

Where does education fit into the changing business model of the pharmacy profession today and in the future? Is education the key to success in the new business model?

I have a bias, but yes, I think it is. The promise that the pharmacy sector is making – that pharmacies across Canada can improve healthcare – depends on different business models and on enriching the interface between pharmacist and patient. If patients see value in that interaction, they will be prepared to support it, and in the future pay for it. I think where pharmacy has been willing to test the waters, they have been pleasantly surprised. I’m



“Pharmacists can now face the patient more directly, and in that sense apply a more robust skillset for patient care.”

in the truest sense of the word, not just a person with a prescription.

How is Pfizer’s education for pharmacists changing to meet the changing landscape?

In the past we tended to go mainly to physicians. For instance, in the cardiovascular domain where we have had a strong presence, medical education was very disease-focused. Now we look at it differently. We see that there is a patient on certain medications, and there is a psychology around that patient before even taking those pills. Someone has to address the burning need to take a pill every day. The person dispensing the prescription — the pharmacist — is critical in shifting the patient’s attitudes and behaviours related to health. In the past, the system was very paternalistic, but today we have empowered patients.

We can bring educational resources to equip motivated patients with resources, facilitated by an enlightened pharmacist. What we’re seeing is that pharmacists are getting the message. There is an adoption curve, but they are more excited about the opportunities than anxious about the risks.

There is a sustainability risk, however. When you’re trying on a new set of skills, it’s like trying on a new pair of shoes. They might hurt at first, but if you have the perseverance, they may well become your most comfortable option.

We want to help pharmacists face the patient differently. What’s the right business model for you as a pharmacist, and how do you get there? We support that through learning and education on both the professional and business side.

Today every stakeholder in the mix needs to look at the environment differently. At Pfizer, we see ourselves as a provider of quality medications, but we are also trying to put new tools in the pharmacist’s toolbox. Like everyone else impacting health, we are challenged to revisit why we exist and what we can contribute. There is a measure of expertise and leadership required of each one of us. **PB**

thinking of a couple of regional chains who have recently found value in directly appealing to the ultimate consumer of care.

The new professional model requires experimentation and advocacy, amongst other things to make it the new base of business. Right now we’re seeing dispensing and a sprinkling of professional services. What I find encouraging is that the momentum is really building. People are not putting up walls to making that shift. We are seeing differentiation in pharmacy retailers and different approaches to serving patients compared with two years ago when I entered this role.

With flu vaccines, by sheer force of will, pharmacy has had profound impact on patients. This is a shining example of leadership and attention to execution. A lot of it is hard work on the ground, heavy lifting, the courage to step into a space they hadn’t stepped into before. The result was a business as well as a health impact.

I think pharmacists are seeing much more clearly that the patient before them is a customer