



A VITAL ROLE: THE PHARMACEUTICALS

A critical part of primary health care, safe, efficacious medicines, is provided by the pharmaceutical industry. "If a clinic is properly stocked with basic pharmaceutical products and a properly trained pharmaceutical assistant is available to dispense them, the effect on the health of the local community is bound to be beneficial," says Konji Sebati, CEO of the Innovative Pharmaceutical Association South Africa (IPASA).

She feels that skilled community health nurses, pharmaceutical assistants, and that lower tier of healthcare worker, not the doctors and nursing sisters, who know their limits, can play a vital role in primary health care. "I trained medical staff in Kenya. At the time the country relied a lot on medical assistants and assistants in

to "name and shame" some, the industry finds itself with its back against the wall. Attempts have been made to benchmark prices in South Africa against those in other countries that have economies with similar characteristics to ours. Among the countries against which we have been benchmarked are New Zealand, Canada, Spain and Australia. Whether these comparisons are valid remains a matter for debate. While there are similarities between the economies of South Africa and the other countries, there are also clear differences.

"The worldwide challenge facing the industry lies in the enormous amount of research needed for each product brought to market," says Sebati. "On a visit to a research facility in England some years ago, I spoke to one scientist whose case is typical. He had created only two products that went to market in ten

many other fields, even anaesthesia. These categories of health care workers should be the pillar of an Ideal Clinic. Many crisis can be averted before they have to be treated at tertiary care facilities. Promotion of health care, prevention and early diagnosis of the biggest and silent killers of today like diabetes, hypertension, and other critical conditions can all be identified early."

The pharmaceutical industry enters Operation Phakisa 2 with considerable enthusiasm. At the same time they are mindful of the challenges that face their industry. Government's control of the pricing of pharmaceutical products is generally accepted and acceptable. It is the methodology adopted that sometimes causes consternation, in particular the rhetoric that seemed not to be in the spirit of partnership but rather adversarial. The industry is always ready and willing to comply, and therefore when there are threats

years of hard research, in the 15 odd years he had been in that research centre." It can sometimes take as long as ten years to bring a product to market after the patent has been registered.

In South Africa there are additional problems. Among them is the long time it takes to register a patent. A four year wait is not exceptional. This therefore means the much talked about 20 years of monopoly is actually, if you are lucky, 10-12 years only.

"This is not the only research problem facing our industry now," says Sebati. "With the Draft IP Policy in discussion now, there are insertions that intend to deny patents being granted for improvements to an existing product. If patent protection for new and inventive incremental innovations in the pharmaceutical field is abolished or limited, investment by pharmaceutical companies in order to improve existing products and remedies and the use thereof, is likely to be reduced, and improved products and remedies may never reach the patients - It will not pay to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs."