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And now on with our Pharmacene podcast.*

Hello and welcome to the Pharmacene podcast. I'm Ciara Duffy and a member of the English
Pharmacy Board. Today, we are excited to be joined by one of the pharmaceutical journals. Women to Watch in . Moriam Ajala studied pharmacy at the University of Manchester and started her career in community pharmacy. She joined Boringer Ingelheim, working initially in medical information and moved into a role as medical advisor and review and certification specialist. Moriam then joined Prism Ideas as medical advisory, becoming head of compliance services before leaving to start her own consultancy business as a final medical signatory last year. Moriam, it's great to have you on the show. A really warm welcome.

Thank you so much for that lovely introduction, Ciara. Lovely to be here.

First is first. What made you want to become a pharmacist?

Well, to be honest, I've always known I wanted to become a pharmacist. So I think as young as about 10, I knew I'd probably go on to study pharmacy. I've always been quite academic. I was always good at science. I know I wanted to do something science related. And I kind of knew it'd be in healthcare, looked at medicine, it looked a bit too long for me. So I decided probably won't do that. And actually growing up, I had family members who owned community pharmacy. So I was quite familiar with what community pharmacy looked like, not necessarily in the UK. But it was something that I was familiar with, I was always around. So it was a mixture of being familiar with it, but also being good at science and knowing that whatever I was supposed to end up doing would have something to do with what I naturally enjoyed and was good at.

So your role at the moment is for your own consultancy firm as a final medical signatory. Can you tell us what is a final medical signatory?

Of course. So it's got a couple of different names. So sometimes we're called medical signatories, sometimes final signatories. In some places they call us nominated signatories, but essentially they all mean the same thing. And what we are in the UK, only doctors or UK registered pharmacists can become final signatories. And sometimes if the product that they're being a signatory for is only used for dental use, then UK registered dentists can actually become final signatories as well. And what we do is we ensure that the events, activities, materials that are produced by pharmaceutical companies are compliant. And in the UK, there's a code of practice called the AVPI code of practice. We make sure that they're compliant with that code, but integrated into that code is kind of UK law, MHRA guidance, and there are codes for Europe. There's even an international code. So just depending on where you workand kind of the target audience of the materials that you're looking at may determine the differences in the code, but we're really there to just ensure compliance. And once we ensure that compliance, we have to sign off material. So if we deem something as compliant, we can sign it off and it's ready to go. And this goes for events, and like I said, all physical items, materials, websites, things like that. And if it's not compliant, then we kind of just nicely say to our team, this isn't compliant, I can't sign off just yet. You have to change this, this and this, and then we'll be good to go. And that's what we do in a nutshell.

Wow. Okay. So can you give us an example of something that would go wrong or something that you wouldn't sign off on?

Yes, I can. So a lot of what we do is based on data of drugs and making sure that how that data is represented allows for healthcare professionals who are looking at the materials that pharmaceutical companies produce, make sure that the information that they're provided with lets them make informed decisions about their prescribing. So if I give a doctor information about drug A, and it says this drug cured. % of patients of this condition with no side effects and is completely safe, I would never sign off something like that, because the chances of that actually being true are. very limited. So if I see the word safe in anything, I think if any signatory sees the word safe in anything, that's kind of a red flag straight away, because nothing's really safe. Water kills people. So you can't really call anything safe. But nobody, hopefully in the pharmaceutical industry would be that adventurous and would make claims like that. But what we're doing is looking at data and looking at the claims made and making sure it's an accurate, true reflection of it. And that when a doctor, for example, picks up one of our adverts, they have got a realistic representation of that drug, both the pros. and the cons of prescribing that drugs for their patient.

So you're essentially protecting the public by ensuring that the material that's distributed to healthcare professionals is accurate?

You could say that. One thing I like to stress, not just to other pharmacists that I speak to, but to people that work in marketing is compliance isn't just the role of the final signatory. Every single person in the company should. You're working for a pharmaceutical company at the end of the day, we produce drugs to make people's lives better, hopefully. And at the end of that, the end use of the patient should be our primary concern and our primary focus. So while, yes, I would like to think that my job does keep people, you know, prevents harm from happening to them, I would hope that that happens at every single stage before materials even get to me.

So is being a medical signatory what you wanted to be when you graduated from Manchester Uni?

Probably not. I didn't even know it existed at the time. I'm pretty sure I didn't. I graduated university and thought I was going to stay in community pharmacy, did it for my pre-reg year, and then became a relief manager for one of the big community pharmacies. And after a while, I just realised it just wasn't for me. There were some kind of quite serious reasons and there were some that were quite vain. For example, I wanted to wear heels into work and I wanted to work from home. So I just knew it wasn't for me at the time. While I was actually a pre-reg, I met a pharmacist who locumed in the pharmacy that I worked in on a Saturday and she worked in industry and we got chatting and I asked her what she did and she told me, and she was actually the first final signatory that I'd ever met. So once I had that conversation with her, and like I said, that was in my pre-registration year, I was like, okay, this is something I could do and this is something I could be interested in. That's when I started looking into it. And yeah, I was quite adamant about getting in from that point. And funnily enough, like I said, she was the first person that was a final signatory I'd ever met. How I got into industry was actually covering her maternity leave. So it came full circle actually.

It's about who you know.

Definitely. Yeah, your network is so important.

So how did you start that journey? You spoke to this woman who inspired you and then what steps did you start to take?

So I started looking for roles in industry and she'd kind of told me that, you know, medical information is how she started. So I was, I just started looking at medical information roles in the pharmaceutical industry. Now, the only kind of exposure that I'd ever had to medical information was a two-week placement at Moorfields Eye Hospital, I think in my summer after third year of university. So it wasn't kind of substantial, but this is why I always tell people no experience is wasted. That being the only medical information experience that I had kind of worked in my benefit was it was on my CV and people looked at it and people acknowledged that I did have medical information experience just from that. So I applied and I kept applying. And I'm notorious for saying this. I applied for jobs before I got an offer. So I'd had interviews, but I didn't get them because, you know, there will be people that are always more experienced, but you just have to keep going. So I kept applying, kept applying. Funny enough, at the exact same time that now my friend, I would call her that, and was going on maternity leave, I actually got another offer. So I. think it was meant to happen when it did. So I had a choice of two companies to join. And I joined the one that was covering her maternity leave, but it does take perseverance. It is more difficult to get into the traditional sectors in pharmacy, but you just have to keep going.

And so can any pharmacist coming from community pharmacy start that path to become a medical. signatory? How would you recommend someone goes ahead if that's the path they want to follow?

So the ABPI Code of Practice says that for a pharmacist to become a final signatory, they have to be UK registered. So they have to be registered with the GPHC. That's not the same requirement with doctors, but for pharmacists, as long as your GPHC registered, yes, you know, you can have community experience, you can have hospital experience. It doesn't matter in that sense. But it's just about harnessing your experience and making sure that that experience is relevant to the role you're applying for. But nothing kind of stops you from a legislation point of view, as long as you're registered with the GPHC.

Do you enjoy it? Would you recommend it as a career?

I love my job. Yes, I would recommend it. And I'd recommend it for multiple reasons. The top one for me is the work-life balance. So I've got quite a young family, and I work from home, I can spend time with them, I can do my nursery drop off and pick up if I want. to. And for me, that was really important. And that was something I prioritised. Even. before I started my family, I kind of said, by the time I get to that stage, I want to. be able to be a working mum who doesn't have to miss school plays, or who isn't late for nursery pickup. I wanted to be able to do that. And I feel blessed that I've been able. to do that. So in that aspect, I do recommend it. But even in my day-to-day work, what I. do is so fulfilling. When I left community pharmacy, I think the thing that I struggled with the most was that I wouldn't be patient facing anymore. I wasn't going to see any. patients anymore. And I really struggled with that. But how I kind of wrapped my head around. that was in community pharmacy, I only helped the patients that came into my pharmacy every day. Whereas now I can work on a drug, and the materials that I help with, or the drugs. that I work on, might actually affect the treatment of thousands, if not millions of. patients. So having that impact from sitting in my spare room, which is my office, is huge for me. But then also knowing that a patient's safety is my priority. At the end of the day, pharmaceutical companies are profit making entities, and they are supposed to make money. But knowing that I work alongside people whose job it is to market or to advertise those drugs, and my sole role there is to make sure that the patients and the end users, and even the healthcare professionals that are receiving this information, receive accurate, up-to-date information which helps them make decisions that keeps my patients safe, that is extremely. fulfilling. I think also people don't talk about the remuneration, the salaries as well. in industry. So I think that's great. I could go on and on. I think working as a final signatory. is great. I love it. And it's something that I genuinely, in my personal life, recommend to any pharmacist I see. It's not for everyone because, like I said, some people need to. be patient facing. And if that's the case, that's completely fine. We need pharmacists to work in every single sector. And I think we're all just as important as each other.

I love what you say there. It's bringing back to the focus always being on the patient. As a successful black woman in pharmacy, what barriers have you overcome to get where you are today?
I think the biggest one is not knowing anybody who looked like me, who worked in industry, or who was a final signatory until I met somebody who was. And to be honest,. as soon as I met somebody who was, I met more black women who were even more successful and had lots of experience. So I think for me, the biggest kind of hurdle was knowledge. And it was knowing that women who don't have to be years into their career can get into that space and can have these fulfilling careers. I think once I overcame that hurdle, it made my life a lot easier. Because not just black women, and I'm going to be honest, not just women, but people in general, once I was in there, they helped me. And I always say my career wouldn't be what it is today without the people that I worked with. And I mean, from the very start of my career. So I think knowledge of people who look like. me is the first thing. And the second thing I'll probably point out is I think I've been. really blessed in that I've had really good managers. I know people who haven't had great managers and that might be a hurdle for some people as well. I think sometimes people assume that industry is an elite sector of pharmacy and it's reserved for a couple of people. And that's not true. I've seen people of all races or genders in an industry and everybody's. welcome there. But as soon as I was able to get in, I found that my biggest strength were the women that I knew there.

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So you just mentioned there about some people don't have great managers. And I know that you're also a mentor. Is there any advice you could give to someone who doesn't have. a great manager and sort of feel stifled in their role?

I think it's important to communicate. If the person you're dealing with is reasonable, state that you don't feel supported. And I think there's ways to do that very professionally. But communication is really important. If they're not a very reasonable person, which is possible, I think it's important to have that in writing and look at that like you. will use it or have to use it as a defence at some point, because sometimes that does happen. I also think that some people sometimes overestimate the importance of having a supportive manager because not everyone's managers for their whole life is going to be supportive. And I think it's important to have a sponsor wherever you work. So a sponsor professionally is somebody who usually is more senior than you, is in rooms that you can't get into yet. because you're just not invited to those meetings just yet. But they have got your best professional interests at heart and they will speak on your behalf. I've had two main sponsors in. my career. One of them is now retired. One of them still works at Boringa, both amazing. women, but they weren't even final signatories. But what they did was they did happen to be. my managers as well. But sometimes like we're talking about, they won't be your managers. What they did was they were very aware of what my career aspirations were, and they took them personally. They said, we're not signatory, so we're not going to go here. You know, we've been working in industry for , years. I was probably still in secondary school or university when some of them joined the industry. But they made sure that they took my aspirations personally and took them into rooms that I wasn't in. So when positions came up, it was like we know who will be just great for this. And they took that. So I think it's really important to have a sponsor as well in the workplace, especially if you know that you want to grow there and you want to progress there.

Great advice. So with the mentoring that you do, what inspired you to take on that role? And what do you gain from it?

So what inspired me was probably my signatory mentor. So when you're becoming a final signatory, when you're training, you're usually assigned one person who you kind of go to. They kind of give you basic training on the code. And then as you grow in your skill set as a signatory, they're usually the person you go back to and say, you know, does this make sense? Is. my gut feeling right here? I had an amazing mentor called Sarah. And as I qualified, you have to pay it forward. I had a great mentor and I thought to myself, I need to be a great mentor here. By the time I was a mentor, COVID-19 had hit. So people were working remotely. And the person I mentored, I didn't actually meet for about a year plus. But the mentoring that I had meant that I felt that I had to be a good mentor to somebody else. So that was actually at Bowinger. After I left Bowinger, I joined like you can see Prism Ideas. And it was a position that I almost fell into the mentoring there. It was something that was a need and it was something that I enjoyed doing. So it was something that I just innately kind of picked up. And then when I became head of compliance, it was actually part of my job description. So that was great for me. I loved it. And I think mentoring allows you, like I said before, to give back. But also when you meet pharmacists who didn't know that a final signatory position existed previously, and then you can kind of build their experience and build the experience that they have in the workplace. I think that's a great feeling. So even pharmacists that I've never actually worked with in a workplace, but I kind of mentor ppart-timeand speak to kind of on weekends. It's amazing to see how transitioning into the pharmaceutical industry has changed their lives. Some of them that want to do it are much happier. They're able to do the things they want to do. They're able to spend time with their friends and family more. So just knowing that I could be part of the foundation of their career, and I don't have to speak to them, you know, years from now, but just knowing that I could contribute to that foundation is amazing for me. It's an amazing feeling.

Such positive impact. They're lucky to have you as their mentor. So I also read somewhere that you're helping people with their job aspirations with CVs. Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

I've actually been doing this for about five years, kind of rushing it on a Saturday morning, but getting paid for it and then ending up spending way too much time on it for somebody, especially with a toddler. In November last year, when I left prison, I launched a company called The Industrial Pharmacist. And what we do is we work with pharmacists, mainly, but you know, I've spoken to doctors as well, who want to move into industry. And what we do there is we help people that want to move into industry. I've had somebody, for example, who wanted to be a public health pharmacist, and I was able to put her in touch with somebody else who already did that. But kind of my main target audience are people that want to move into industry. We look at CVs, we help

 them flag jobs that would be good for them to apply for. And then if they need help with their applications, we can help them. with that as well. Like I said, it's something that I've been doing for about five years on and off anyway. So I kind of thought, now that I'm consulting, might as well turn this into a business venture. And I'm really grateful that it's continued to thrive. It keeps me busy. But it also means that I'm able to have a smaller business. It's not kind of my mainstay, but it means that I can have a business that helps me do what I like and help people, but it also makes me feel fulfilled as well.

So did you start two businesses then last year?

Yes, technically, it's a consultancy. So it all comes under one, but I do two things under. the consultancy. The first is the final signatory. Like I said, I love my job. I don't think. I can think of something that's going to make me give up being a final signatory. So that's what I do on one arm. And that's obviously working with pharmaceutical companies and working with a client there. But the other side of that consultancy is working with pharmacists who want to move into that. The good thing about that is there isn't really a conflict of interest there. It means I can do two things that I enjoy. It means that I can balance. the two things I was doing previously anyway, but fit them into my working week. So it was a win-win actually.

Wow. Well, the Pharmaceutical Journal was definitely right that you were one to watch in 2022. So you talked about the role of mentors and sponsors in your life. Do you have one that would particularly inspire you or you don't want to mention them because they're all wonderful?

First one is Bemi. She's the pharmacist that I said I met when I was a pre-registration pharmacist. We're really good friends now. I know her kids and her husband and she knows mine and my husband. But my career in industry started because she called me to cover up her maternity leave. I will never forget her and she's a great influence. And even till today we're still very much in touch, both professionally and in our personal and social lives. So she's great. There's Sarah, who was my final signatory mentor. I still keep in touch with her because we work in different companies now. But if you've got a question about the code, I don't think you can ever have enough signatory friends to just run this by without revealing anything confidential. But does this make sense to you? Am I on the right path here? I'll probably mention my two biggest sponsors, I'd probably say, were Jane and Ellie, both who used to work at Boringa. Sorry, Ellie still does work at Boringa. But were amazing sponsors who just championed my career aspirations and I'll never forget them. And then there's somebody called Mark as well. So Mark was a final signatory and he inspired me on kind of a different level. Yes, he was a signatory and he was a great signatory, but he really taught me kind of the value of being good at what you do, but also enjoying your personal life as. well and just making sure that there was a good balance there as well. So I've got quite a few people and I could probably go on for a long time. But yes, very important that you keep those relationships going, because none of those people have I ever just interacted with once or just for a year or so. I'm in contact with all of them up to quite recently. So very, very important that you nurture your pharmacy and in my case, your signatory network.

Very important. So what's the best piece of advice you were ever given?

There was somebody who wasn't a signatory, wasn't a doctor or pharmacist. She said to me, if there's ever an opportunity that I'm interested in, and it's offered to me professionally, take it. Said even if you're not sure that you know how to do it, just take it. She said, you will learn how to do it while you're there. If you don't like it, that's another situation and you can just take a step back. You haven't done anything abominable, like you haven't lost anything by that. If anything, you now know that you don't enjoy what you're doing, but taking the opportunity is really important. And since she told me that, I've done exactly that. And there have been things that I've tried and I've just kind of said, well, this isn't for me. And sometimes it might take a couple of weeks for me to realise and sometimes a little bit longer. But I think it's very important to take opportunities, be honest. about your capabilities, but reassure whoever's offering the opportunity that you're willing to learn and that willingness to learn will really push you. Never say no to something you're interested in just because you think you don't know how to do it just yet.

So when you're not being a medical signatory or reviewing the CV, I don't know where you. find the time, or running after your two-year-old, what is it that you enjoy to do?

Something I do as a volunteer is I'm actually a school governor for a local primary school. My kids aren't at primary school age just yet, but I think, like I said already, it's really important to give back. So what that helps me do is it keeps me grounded in that it's relatively local. So I know the issues that affect people who live in the area that I live in, but it means I'm looking out for the students. I don't know them. My kids don't go to that school. I've got kind of no affiliation with the students at that school yet. But it means at the back of my mind in my role as a governor, I have to think of the best interest for the students who attend this school. That doesn't take up too much of my time, but there's quite a bit of reading involved and making sure I'm keeping on top of what's going on there. So I really enjoy doing that. Kind of in my personal life, spending time with my friends and family is really, really important to me, whether it's brunch or traveling or going to the spa. I make sure that I take relaxation and quality time with them very, very seriously. Traveling is something that me and my husband love to do. We got married just before COVID hit, so we're making up. for lost time right now, even with young kids. But, you know, we're all ready to go. And we've mastered it. You know, we did a hour flight with a six-month-old. So I think it. can't get worse than that.

So what's next for you, Moriam?

I think I want to keep doing what I'm doing. I think when I started the industrial pharmacist in November, I felt safe. I felt like I was at home. I felt like this is what I was supposed to be doing. Like I've said, I still enjoy being a final signatory. It's something that I think is a very important role. And I think pharmacists do it very well. I enjoy working in the pharmaceutical industry for the benefits that I've talked about. So I will keep doing that. With the other arm of the industrial pharmacist, I hope it can grow because I hope that I can help more pharmacists who want to transition into industry do that successfully. I'm not in charge of recruitment agencies or I don't have any kind of links with any pharmaceutical companies to mass employ people. So I don't know how that's going to work just yet, but I'm having fun figuring it out and helping one person at a time is still really satisfying to me. So I hope I'm able to do that and just grow, grow in that aspect, grow in my personal life and continue to just enjoy the work life balance that I have because I enjoy being a working mom. It's something I'm extremely proud of and I want to keep doing that and be happy while I keep doing that.

Can our listeners reach out to you on LinkedIn or any of the socials?

Yes, of course. So the industrial pharmacist has a LinkedIn page, which people are welcome. to join. I have got a mailing list as well and they can ask for details of that. My personal LinkedIn is Maurya Ajala, happy to be reached there. If anyone wants to reach me by email directly, they can contact me at info, that's I M F O at the industrial pharmacist dot co. dot UK.

So Moriam, we've discussed so much today. It's a whirlwind from over job applications trying to get a role in industry to helping others secure roles. Really inspirational. We've talked about the importance of sponsorship and mentorship and giving something back. And we've talked about the positives of having such a fulfilling role and positive patient impact despite not being patient facing any longer. Thank you so much for your time.

I really enjoyed today. Thank you so much.

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