

Dispensing changes threaten future of suburban pharmacist

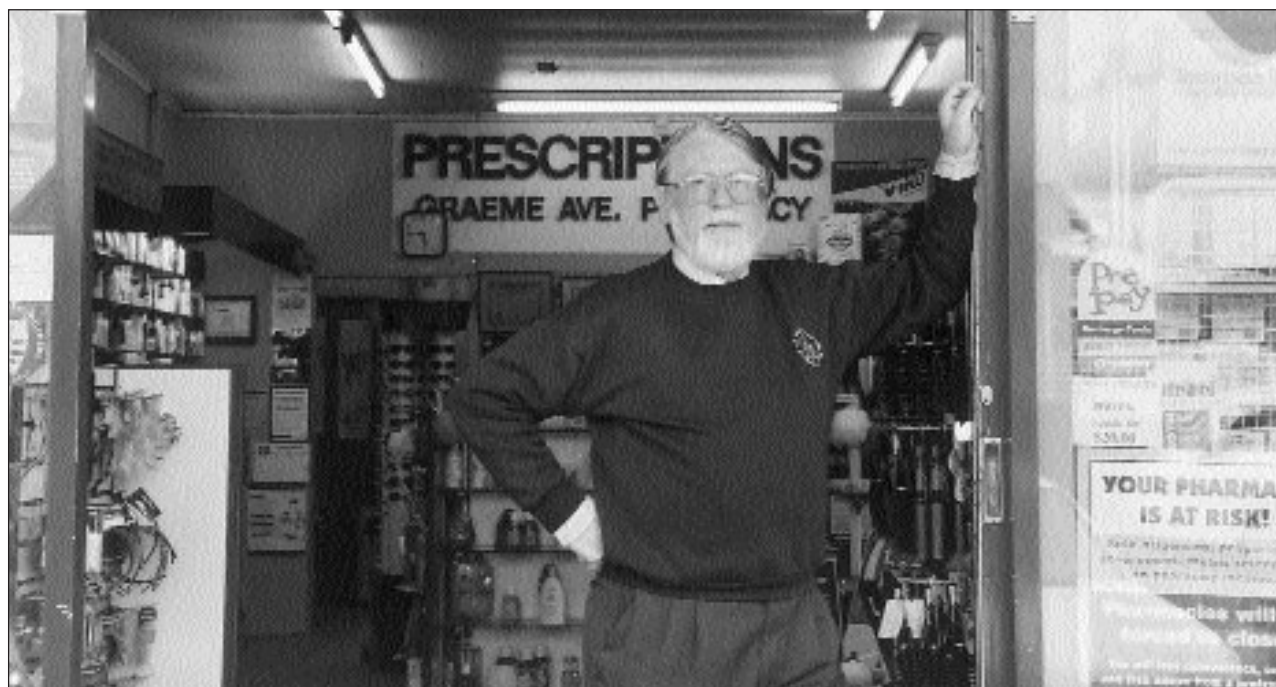


PHOTO: KATHRYN PHILPOTT



PHOTO: SARAH MAC LELLAN

ANGRY: Bruce Shanks in front of the pharmacy he may lose

Mangere pharmacist Bruce Shanks is outraged at the Government's changes to pharmacy regulations, writes KATHRYN PHILPOTT.

Pharmacist Bruce Shanks is adept at dealing with other people's problems, but was a bit thrown by his own virus this week. The problem is the 65-year-old can't mix a remedy to soothe computers.

The uncharacteristic technological glitch at his Mangere East pharmacy has upset the printing of his pill bottle labels. "I was perhaps a bit difficult to live with for about 20 minutes there," he laughs.

Nestled between a rundown Chinese takeaway shop and an equally ancient fruit and vegetable store on the corner of Graeme Ave, the pharmacy where Mr Shanks has worked for the past eight years is a bright spot in an increasingly depressed neighbourhood.

Mr Shanks is something of a shining light in this close-knit community too. Small in stature, with a spiky white beard, sleeveless vest and black suede slip-ons, he could almost pass for one of Santa's helpers. In this, the 48th year of his career, the long-time Manurewa resident exudes the energy of someone far younger than himself.

Before working in Mangere East, Mr Shanks worked in Hillsborough for 15 years and Manurewa for 19. He says managing the Graeme Ave pharmacy is a career highlight.

But it is a career he worries will soon end because of Government changes to pharmacy regulations.

The changes, which came into effect on October 1, mean a move from monthly back to three-monthly dispensing. This means instead of seeing his customers every month to give them their repeat prescriptions, Mr Shanks will see them only four times a year.

Government drug-buying agency Pharmac pushed the changes as more

convenient for busy people, but for Mr Shanks they pose an income problem. The Government pays him each time he fills a prescription.

Mr Shanks is aware the pharmacy faces a challenge ahead and may have to close. Unlike larger, mall-based pharmacies, Graeme Ave does not sell enough non-medical products like shampoo or sunscreen to offset the likely drop in earnings. Mr Shanks is trying to stay positive about the future of the business, which has become something of an institution in Mangere East, but he worries for his customers, some of whom have been coming to the pharmacy since it opened in 1959.

"I know this community would be really upset if they didn't have us here and I know our doctor would be really upset if we weren't here."

Dr John Upsdell says he certainly would be upset if the pharmacy had to close.

"It would be very difficult for people around here. Quite a few come to me because they don't have transport. The nearest other chemist is Massey Rd or old Papatoetoe, and if they are walking with kids, that's a lot to ask of them to go all that way. It would be a significant loss — a significant loss to the community."

These concerns are supported by customer Gwenneth Bristowe, who has visited the Graeme Ave pharmacy for 35 years. She says Mr Shanks plays a vital role in her day-to-day life.

"He reminds me about my pills and really tells me off," says the local resident. "I wouldn't do without him."

It was his concern for people that first attracted Mr Shanks, then an Otahuhu College student, to a career in pharmacy. Indentured to a master pharmacist at Papatoetoe, Mr Shanks says his training drilled into him the meaning of good customer service.

"For many years we thought we had a much better training because we related to the public much better. Because we were working with the public right through our academic

training," says the man whose upbringing on a farm in Clevedon first sparked his love for nature and science.

Times have not always been good for Bruce Shanks. While working in Hillsborough in the early 1990s, he was robbed twice — once by three men wielding knives, and again by two offenders with shotguns. On both occasions the motive was drugs.

"I was really hacked off afterwards that I didn't stand up to them, but you can't stand up to two people or three people," he says matter-of-factly.

As something of a father figure to his customers, Mr Shanks lends an earnest ear to all kinds of people and their problems. He has learned to greet pharmacy regulars in their own languages — something that shows his dedication to consumers.

"We see them almost from the cradle to the grave and get to know them very well. You go through all their little heartaches. You go through all their anguishes when their husband walks out on them, or their wife walks out on them."

Then you see them remarry and you see them having a new family," says the pharmacist, who is himself divorced with two adult children.

He speaks of one customer, "Aunt Mary", a former drug addict, who recovered after the forthright pharmacist challenged her about her habit.

"Sometimes you have to take people and show them themselves in a true mirror."

This honest approach is one reflected in Mr Shanks' thoughts on Pharmac's decisions this year.

"I sort of went into it as a bit of a calling and that's why I've stuck at it — because I think that we are essential. And this is what distresses me about what the Government is doing now. They don't see us as essential."

"If I was 40, I'd have my say, stand right up. But at 65, who's going to listen to me?"

The Pharmacy Guild, an industry body to which Mr Shanks belongs, estimates that more than 200 small

pharmacies may close as a direct result of three-monthly dispensing. During a public consultation period, the guild sent a submission to Pharmac outlining industry concerns. These included patient confusion, infrequent monitoring and possible drug wastage — comments that along with other criticisms led to minor proposal changes, but not enough to stop the plan going ahead.

The Government's official policy focus seems at odds with the informal atmosphere of the quaint little pharmacy and the old-fashioned values of its manager.

"It's not like your main street shops where everything is official and efficient. It's a family," says Mr Shanks.

This is a business that gives credit to its customers when they can't pay. "At times we can have as much as \$4000 owing in our book," says Mr Shanks casually.

"These people round here don't have money — they're not affluent, but there's never an argument over money in this shop. If they don't have the money for the medicine, then we write it down in the book and they pay it when they've got it," Mr Shanks explains, as if their accounting practices are the most normal in the world.

"You have to trust people, and this is part of being a pharmacist. They are sick, so what am I going to say? 'No, no I'm not giving you your medicine. Johnny can go die on the street.' I can't say that."

Shop manager and offsider, Glennis Robinson, has worked with Shanks for three years. She says personal service is something people appreciate.

"They all want to chat and we can do that. In a mall you can't."

With the move to three-monthly dispensing and a possible closure on the cards, it is this familiarity with people Mr Shanks says he would miss most.

"If I only see my customers four times a year, I won't know them. When I see them 12 times a year I know them. So we are going to lose the

social interchange. I'm not going to find out that their daughter is living in Tasmania. I'm not going to find these things out. I'm not going to be able to identify with them as people. When the daughter comes home to visit mum and dad, I'm not going to know her, or anything about her.

"When the kids come in, we know who they are, and we know who their grandparents are."

"You get the customer who you know, every time he comes in, has got a story for you. Might be a little bit of an off-colour one, and he'll look around to see if there's anybody listening."

"We get the customers who come right out the back into the dispensary, and want to talk to you while you're trying to do the dispensing."

One of these, spotted striding confidently past the counter, is John Kilgour, a customer at Graeme Ave for 40 years.

Mr Kilgour has a jovial rapport with Mr Shanks.

"I think health professionals are vital to life and I think you need to know who you are dealing with," he says.

Mr Shanks says the long-term effects on the pharmacy will not be realised until December when current repeats run out.

If changes spark the beginning of the end for the Graeme Ave pharmacy, the impact on Mr Shanks personally may see him spending more time working in his neglected garden.

When asked if he will look for another job, he laughs.

"I would have to rely on my track record. I would hope that I'd get head-hunted."

And as if to prove that beyond the old-fashioned values he is thoroughly modern and imminently employable, Mr Shanks shows me the new computer he had shipped in "with all the programmes" to keep things humming along nicely out the back.

While Mr Shanks might be coping with technological change, policy changes may leave a wound that he's not capable of healing.