



Four brothers, eight pharmacies, the majority in the Port Macquarie region, with the chain headquartered here in the Hastings - literally, on Rawdon Island. This month, Susie chats with Ibby Khodary, the smiling eminence atop the mid-town shop, about the brothers' drive to build discount pharmacies in country community settings, yet retain the "friendly family chemist" touch.



## Ibby Khodary

**C**omfy timber-framed visitor's chairs sit handily near Khodary's dispensaries, for customers waiting for scripts. Intricate carving identifies the upholstered chairs as hand-made, yet they're at odds with the stores' modern decor. It's meant to be: that they make a statement. They're the work of Mohamed, an Egyptian who travelled to Lebanon, married Soumaya, came to Oz with their eldest an infant and established a home at Condell Park, in Sydney's dense mid-west. A talented wood carver, he supported his ultimate brood of six chiselling handcrafted furniture pieces to private clients' bespoke designs. And sustained them with his philosophy of "family". "Dad used to say to us," third son Ibrahim "Ibby" Khodary says of his brothers' professional and familial bonding, "if you have one stick, you can break it. But put several sticks together and you can't break them, no matter what. He could see we were all developing in the same profession. He knew in business you have ups and downs but he said it should not affect your relationship."

When eldest son Fawaz graduated in pharmacy from Sydney Uni 21 years ago, he planted a sapling that's flourished to a robust multi-branched tree. Absent a suitable city job, Fawaz began work in a Coonabarabran pharmacy, unwittingly founding the family's fortunes in the bush. He soon bought the business and, having met his wife there, put down roots in the western NSW town, until moving to Port last year. Second son Said, having passed through the Great Hall five years later, ultimately bought a pharmacy at Greenacre, 7km from the family home.

Seven years on, Ibby followed them: with a degree in analytical chemistry and a Masters in Pharmacy from Newcastle, he'd also had a bush baptism. He'd met his future wife, a partner who lights up his life, Lina, at uni; she was in youngest brother Hamdy's year and also a country girl, from Canberra. The couple shared a Middle Eastern heritage, Lina's parents Palestinian, from a rural, olive-growing, region too. It seemed like two parallel families, Khodary recalls, in size, origins and, largely, health-care professions: both of them families of four boys, two girls. Lina, herself a pharmacist, has two brothers who are doctors, two brothers in the sciences and a sister a dentist. Khodary's two sisters, both graduates, are teachers.

As the brothers emerged, so too did their chain of chemist stores. Between them they next acquired the Lake Cathie pharmacy, then Port Macquarie, Laurieton, Lakewood and Lighthouse, the five shops easily the largest grouping among this region's many chemist stores. Their eighth presence - the family's seventh in the bush - is at Kurri Kurri. Each brother has his specialty; broadly, Fawaz looks after the financials, Said takes care of discount deals, buying and catalogues; Ibby attends to pharmaceutical reps and online and 1300-number orders and despatch, and Hamdy maintains the website that markets ethical (pharmaceutical) and general products to rural communities, far-flung Australia and overseas. The businesses needed to be online to stay competitive. "If you snooze, you lose" is another family saying I learn.

There's a dual business philosophy and an accent on range, service and price: "First and foremost", Khodary says, is primary health

care for the community.

"People like to know you; they want familiar faces, familiarity with the chemist, it builds trust. It's what I try to do and what all our staff are trained for. We never sacrifice service. We're open 365 days a year, 8 to 7 weekdays and 9 to 6 Saturdays, Sundays and public holidays with free deliveries daily." The 24 employees at this biggest of the local stores are something of a family themselves; they enjoy generous discounts and gather with the wider group staff on occasions like Xmas and for training by Lina, who was Laurieton pharmacist before the couple's first child, Sophia, arrived 19 months ago. Lina now works part-time to keep abreast of medications and the industry and occasionally subbies on Saturdays if the Horton Street store's other chemist is away, when her husband plays Premier League first grade with Port Saints on his only day off.

The second aspect of the business is discounting. Eight stores mean keen buying power but the family eschews "discount chemist clutter". "We don't want to bring pharmacy down to that level; we have nice clean shops so people can enjoy discounts without feeling they're in a cheap store. We have carpet, bright lighting, shelving to make self-selecting easy, good staff and our good service, the core of pharmacy." Khodary's decamped in 2010 from near the big banks downtown to their "superstore" in lower Horton Street. The move seems to have "stretched the CBD's focus", Khodary feels. "When we moved we weren't aware

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of Coles' intentions. Initially things were a bit slow but everyone was excited about the parking [availability] and now we've seen a big improvement in this end of town." Indeed, the pharmacy's presence seems to have led the block's resurgence; a mini food hub of Sushi Train, Pizza Capers and a new Chinese restaurant joining KFC, with JB Hi-Fi and perhaps Of-ficeworks joining Coles.

The elder Khodarys now have 19 grandchildren, the oldest studying biotechnology, so maybe there are more sticks to be added to the bundle. Khodary's own work seldom stops: there's his role as pharmacist-in-charge as well as ancillary managerial duties ex-dispensary to think of when the doors close. "I enjoy it, I feel at home when I'm at work. If you enjoy it, it shows. As my daughter gets older I might want a little more time off. We've got a nice vegie patch of cucumbers, tomatoes, herbs and fruit trees like I had when we were growing up. Since Sophia started walking it's been good bonding. I want her to know a cucumber comes from a plant, not a supermarket.

"So we plant it, and then we get out the little pink watering can ... and it's very rewarding when we get our first cucumbers!"

For Khodary, "first and foremost" before pharmacy, still comes family.

*With Olympian James Magnussen puffing Port up with pride, we'd hoped to talk to his mother in May. But Donna Magnussen says James's achievements are all his own and she doesn't want to encroach. Typical Mum! Happy Mother's Day to all.*