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FAMILY MEDICINE IN FOCUS



Family Medicine in Focus

By Dr Wong Tien Hua, Guest Editor

FAMILY DOCTORS used to be seen as the lesser cousins of specialists. It was not too long ago that general practice was seen as the last resort, a backup plan for young doctors who either could not get into a specialist training position of their choice; or found the path to specialisation daunting, unable to accept the idea of frequent hospital calls, long hours in the wards and tough examinations at the end of training.

During Chinese New Year, dreaded questions from well-meaning and concerned relatives include, "When are you getting married?" and "When are you having children?" For a young family doctor, a final query was frequently added, "Why be a GP, why didn't you specialise?"

General practice suffered from an image problem, not just from the public but among doctors as well. What were the factors that contributed to this?

Firstly, there was no formal training path for Family Medicine in the early years. One could set up a clinic in the community armed only with a basic medical degree. Specialists, however, had to undergo much longer training, gaining expert knowledge, and thereby necessitating better pay and respect.

Secondly, GPs tend to work in solo clinics for long hours. There was no Continuing Medical Education requirement and no chance to communicate with other doctors outside the confines of the clinic walls. Clinical experience was gained on the job and through self-directed learning. Such professional isolation meant that it was difficult for GPs to expand their skills and, over time, these became limited to basic primary care.

Thirdly, the rapid developments in science and technology gave rise to specialisation in Medicine. Much of the media attention was given to novel surgical procedures, high-tech diagnostic machines, and the building of tertiary medical centres with the latest cutting-edge technology. Primary care inadvertently took a back seat.

However, Family Medicine is now changing rapidly.

In this issue of *SMA News*, we are pleased to present a snapshot of Family Medicine today. Beginning with the Family Medicine residency programme and leading to the Fellowship of the College of Family Physicians Singapore, local Family

Medicine training in 2014 is structured at every level with clearly defined endpoints of learning and expertise. The notion of the GP working alone in a "sweatshop" is giving way to medical group practices with family practitioners sharing expertise and interacting actively via communications technology with other members of the healthcare team.

The truth is that Family Medicine is an enormously challenging and rewarding discipline. The family doctor is the first point of contact for every episode of illness. He looks after patients of all ages, not just their physical but also psychosocial well-being, provides preventive care, decides which community resources are suitable (including necessity of referral to specialists), and is part of the surveillance of disease outbreaks in the community.

No two days in general practice are ever the same; no two patients are completely alike. The family doctor never knows who might walk into the consult room next – perhaps a wailing child with a forehead laceration, an elderly patient with poorly controlled diabetes, or a stressed out office worker with irritable bowels. It is like running a No Menu Restaurant. Imagine if any hungry person could come in to order whatever they wanted, with no way to predict what the next patron is going to order. There had better be a competent chef who can cook a variety of dishes!

Next month, World Family Doctors' Day will be commemorated on 19 May. This special day for family physicians was officially declared during the World Organization of Family Doctors meeting in Mexico in 2010. It is a day chosen to highlight the role and contribution of family doctors in healthcare systems around the world, and to celebrate the progress being made in Family Medicine internationally. ■



Dr Wong Tien Hua is the 1st Vice President of SMA.

To celebrate World Family Doctors' Day, the College of Family Physicians Singapore (CFPS) will be holding their first World Family Doctors' Day Gala Dinner at Marina Bay Sands on 17 May 2014. If you are interested in attending the event or wish to find out more, please contact CFPS at tel: 6223 0606 or email: contact@cfps.org.sg.