



# FAMILY MEDICINE: ONE DISCIPLINE, MANY SETTINGS

By A/Prof Cheong Pak Yean and A/Prof Goh Lee Gan

**TODAY**, Family Medicine (FM) is practised in many different contexts. Comprehensive outpatient care is provided by well-organised polyclinics, with good links to care delivered in specialist outpatient clinics and the wards of restructured hospitals. There are also large medical companies delivering parallel care in the private sector, alongside smaller healthcare entities and single GPs, whose clinics are distributed around the island. Together, these groups of family physicians deliver a high standard of ambulatory care to patients.

FM needs to go upstream into the interface with institutional care. In recent years, clinical departments for FM have been established in some public hospitals in Singapore. The forerunner is the Department of Family Medicine and Continuing Care (FMCC) in Singapore General Hospital (SGH), set up in 2006, the first of its kind. The clinical services provided by SGH's FMCC include inpatient services for patients with multiple co-morbidities and complex care needs, specialist outpatient clinics, integrated care case management, health assessment clinics and home medical care for sub-acute patients. There is also a Department of Family and Community Medicine at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital, the latest hospital to be opened.

Meanwhile, National University Hospital (NUH) has an academic Division of Family Medicine that provides training in addition to healthcare services. Its clinical staff members provide ambulatory care in the General Medicine specialist outpatient clinic, the FM residency continuity clinics; advanced disease care in the Agency for Integrated Care's HOME (HOListic care for MEDically advanced patients) Programme; intermediate care at St Luke's Hospital; and long term care at Bethany Methodist Nursing Home (BMNH).

Moving beyond the traditional GP setting in the community, family doctors are now providing care in diverse areas, namely: patients' homes, nursing homes, hospices, community hospitals, the newly-minted Family Medicine

Clinics (FMCs), restructured hospitals and academic FM centres.

## Family doctors practising in a wide variety of environments

### 1. Private GPs

Many family physicians practise in solo clinics or in small groups. Dr Julian Lim set up his solo practice 20 years ago in the HDB heartland of Teban Gardens. He continues to provide clinical care in addition to teaching doctors and medical students. Dr Lim is also the Director of the Master of Medicine (FM) Programme B, and has been a great inspiration to doctors enrolled in the course. Programme B prepares doctors with the Graduate Diploma in FM but are not in the FM residency programme, for the MMed (FM) examinations.

**Photo 1** Celebrating with the successful MMed (FM) Class of 2012; on the right are the trainers: Suraj, Julian, Richard, Soo Kiang and Luke (not in photo: Jean and Farhad)

### 2. Nursing homes: in-house physicians

Many large nursing homes employ family physicians as resident medical staff. For the past eight years, Dr Marie Stella P Cruz has cared for 280 very frail elderly patients in BMNH as a consultant family physician. She also organises in-house Continuing Medical Education programmes for the staff. Dr Cruz is also a visiting consultant to the National University Health System's (NUHS) Division of Family Medicine, where she teaches doctors in the NUHS FM residency programme the skills of caring for patients with long term care needs.

**Photo 2** Beyond medical care: Dr Marie Cruz (left) and a nursing aide bring care and cheer. For most residents, BMNH is their final home; and for some, the healthcare staff are their only family

### 3. Nursing homes: visiting physicians

Medical support in many local nursing homes is provided by family physicians who operate their own ambulatory



clinics. Dr Winston Hwang, a family physician, runs a clinic in Tampines and does medical rounds in nursing homes. His skills of caring for these nursing home patients are honed by 25 years' experience in clinical practice and postgraduate training. Dr Hwang also teaches medical students at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine as an adjunct lecturer.

**Photo 3** Dr Winston Hwang reviewing residents at the Lions Home for the Elders

#### 4. Hospice physicians

Many patients in hospices are cared for by family physicians. Dr Tan Yew Seng is the Medical Director of Assisi Hospice and an adjunct assistant professor at Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School. He finds the bio-psycho-social model in FM highly relevant to hospice work. The FM model provides strong clinical Medicine, ministers to the patients' psycho-emotional needs, and supports their families from admission into bereavement.

**Photo 4** Dr Tan Yew Seng treating an elderly lady in a hospice room

#### 5. Community hospital physicians

Bright Vision Hospital (BVH), a 318-bed community hospital in Hougang, provides rehabilitation/sub-acute care, inpatient palliative care, nursing care and outpatient rehabilitation. Dr Matthew Ng, a consultant at SGH's FMCC and Head of BVH Medical Services, supervises the work of a team of registrars and medical officers in BVH. This community hospital is unique in that it provides intermediate and long term care services under one roof, and allows care across the breadth of FM.

**Photo 5** Dr Matthew Ng doing ward rounds with his team in BVH

#### 6. FMC physicians

FMCs are a pilot initiative by the Ministry of Health to transform the primary care sector, where private GPs will collaborate with Regional Health Systems, to provide team-based care in a multi-doctor, multidisciplinary

setting. Dr Koh Thuan Wee, Director of Frontier FMC in Clementi, works with other family physicians to co-manage patients with complex chronic conditions, with the input of specialist colleagues from NUH.

**Photo 6** FMC family physician Dr Kevin Thia discussing a case with the FMC case manager, enrolled nurse and pharmacy technician

#### 7. Restructured hospital physicians

Many restructured hospitals now have independent FM departments. SGH's FMCC currently provides a range of clinical services across the continuum of care – from tertiary hospitals to patients' homes. These services are aimed at defragmenting care for patients with comorbidities and complex care needs. Dr Tan Shu Yun, consultant family physician at SGH's FMCC, works with a multidisciplinary team that is trained in FM. They work closely with specialist colleagues in SGH and community care providers to ensure a safe transition for patients back to their homes.

**Photo 7** Dr Tan Shu Yun (back row, right) with her multidisciplinary team in the wards of SGH

#### 8. Clinician-teachers in academic FM

Academic FM centres are found in the Institute of Family Medicine (the academic training arm of the College of Family Physicians Singapore [CFPS]), the three local medical schools, residency programmes and Masters courses. A/Prof Tan Boon Yeow is the Programme Director of the NUHS FM residency programme. This designation involves more than teaching alone; he is heavily invested in the development of the residents, both as persons as well as physicians. In addition to being the Medical Director of St Luke's Hospital, A/Prof Tan is also the Censor-in-Chief of CFPS, a post that ensures he is involved in advanced medical training beyond residency programmes. ■

**Photo 8** A/Prof Tan Boon Yeow (first from right) and Dr Ong Chooi Peng (first from left) with NUHS FM residents: Drs Laura Lim, Daryl Phua, Linus Chua and Eugene Chan