

INTRODUCTION

The Consultation is the central act of medicine and thus it deserves to be well understood.

The state of health fluctuates and studies show that physicians see only a small fraction of the health problems experienced by the population at large.

The only study which could be found relating to reasons for consultation in Malta was that by Agius Muscat and Carabott (1989 MMJ) which compared the content of general practice in health centres and in private practice of 8 GP's working in government and private practice.

This paper looks at the reasons for consultations in a small practice in which the author practices and attempts to examine

reasons as to why patients consult their family doctor.

METHOD

This retrospective study looks at 500 consecutive office consultations in private practice at the author's practice. The population is semi-rural and by and large most of the patients reside in Dingli. Analysis of the consultation looked at whether the consultation was for a new problem, whether this was a follow-up to a problem which was currently being investigated or treated or whether the purpose of the consultation was for reasons of prevention.

The actual reason for the consultation was then analysed and classified according to the medical problem dealt with. Contacts which involved pure paperwork (e.g.

repeat prescription, certification), were specifically excluded as it was felt that these reasons were beyond the scope of the study.

RESULTS

The practice population structure follows closely that of the population of the village but one has to note that, as people in Malta do not register with a practice, it means that the age/sex profile of one's practice reflects people who have had to come to a doctor at some time rather than the actual potential population.

The age and sex breakdown of the study sample shows peaks in the first five years of life and another peak for females in the childbearing years. This is explained by the fact that the population structure of Dingli has

shifted to a younger mean age due to the development of three housing estate projects since 1973.

The 500 consultations in this study were done by 308 different patients. Of these 181 consulted once during the period of the study, 84 consulted twice, 29 consulted three times, 9 consulted 4 times, 2 consulted 5 times and 3 consulted 6 times.

Table 1 broadly categorises the consultations. Table 2 shows the frequency of the six most commonly occurring reasons for consulting.

DISCUSSION

Besides dealing with acute episodes of disease the family

doctor also plays a very important role in the management of chronic disorders, notably hypertension, diabetes, depression and asthma. Our role as primary health care providers is seen in well-person and developmental checks, immunisation and monitoring of pregnancy.

It seems that painful conditions and pain are very

important triggers for patients to consult their doctor. If one had to group ENT problems, most of them painful, with all other painful conditions, one would find that pain accounts for 25% of reasons for consultation.

In spite of the differences in population characteristics in the sample studied there are important areas of agreement regarding the content of family practice not only on Malta but also internationally.

The reasons for consultation in family medicine clearly demonstrate the different roles played by the family doctor in the management of patient problems, support and caring for patients and the family doctor's role in prevention and health education as well as a gate keeper to access to various areas of secondary care. All this starts with the consultation and this is why the consultation and its dynamics must be very well understood. ◆

TABLE 1 **TYPE OF CONSULTATION**

	Number (%)	
New Problem	215	43
Chronic/Follow-up	195	39
Preventive	90	18
TOTAL	500	100

TABLE 2 **REASONS FOR CONSULTATION**

	Number (%)	
ENT Infections	54	10.8
Pain (Orthopaedic)	53	10.6
Well-Person Check	50	10.0
Blood Pressure	49	9.8
Diabetes	34	6.8
Depression	30	6.0
All other reasons	230	46.0
TOTAL	500	100.0