



ACTIVITIES OF THE MALTA COLLEGE OF FAMILY DOCTORS PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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The Malta College of Family Doctors is an autonomous academic institution founded in 1989 whose object is to encourage, foster and maintain the highest possible standards in family medicine in Malta, and to sustain and improve the professional qualifications of members of the medical profession in Malta who are engaged in family medicine.

ORIGIN & DEVELOPMENT

The need for advancement of family medicine in Malta had been felt for a long time, but any such activities were not possible before the end in August 1987 of the ten-year medical dispute. In March 1988, three family doctors, namely Dr Denis Soler, Dr Wilfred Galea and Dr Ray Busuttil, were appointed to a **General Practice Sub-Committee** of the Postgraduate Medical Committee (PGMC) of the University Faculty of Medicine & Surgery, to devise a **development plan for family medicine in Malta**.

In their report presented to the PGMC in November 1988, **four areas were outlined for future development:**

1. The development of a Department of Family Medicine within the Faculty of Medicine;
2. The establishment of a programme of continuing medical education for family doctors;
3. The development of a vocational training programme in family medicine;
4. The setting up of a Malta College of Family Doctors.

As a result of intensive lobbying by these three doctors, Dr Alistair Donald and Dr Edwin Martin, chairman and member of the International Committee of the Royal College of General Practitioners, were invited to Malta in November 1989 to as-

sess the situation and offer their advice. These five gentlemen worked hard together to produce a charter for a proposed **Malta College of Family Doctors**, and the formation of the College in fact was formally announced by Dr Soler in the presence of Dr Donald and Dr Martin during a Postgraduate Medical Committee Meeting.

A provisional committee was set up to draw up a **College Statute**, and both were formally endorsed during the College's first general meeting on the 4th April 1990, with Dr Denis Soler as College President, Dr Wilfred Galea as Vice-President and Dr Ray Busuttil as Honorary Secretary.

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The College made an impact in the early 1990's on the **proposed reforms in primary health care services in Malta**, before these were eventually shelved for political reasons. It had earned itself representation on the Family Doctor Scheme Council, which had been envisaged as the body to run the general practitioner service. The College's role was to be not only an advisory one, but it would

have been responsible for the organisation of the compulsory refresher course for doctors joining the scheme. Its functions would have included also the evaluation of the suitability of practice premises, the accreditation of doctors for the receipt of the CME allowance, and the assessment of practices for the receipt of the good practice allowance.

EDUCATION & ACCREDITATION

Through pressure from the College, the post of part-time lecturer in general practice within the Department of Public Health in the Faculty of Medicine was instituted on 1st January 1991 with the appointment of Dr Ray Busuttil. Dr Busuttil holds the post to this day.

There being no formal training for family medicine in Malta, the College launched a **Continuing Professional Development Programme** in September 1990, in the form of a three-day meeting held in each term of the academic year. The year after, a system of **accreditation of CME activities** was initiated, with continuing membership of the College depending on the accumulation of sufficient credit units within this scheme.

The credibility and status earned by the College in the first three years of its existence resulted in the Postgraduate Medical Committee of the University's Faculty of Medicine formally passing on to the College the

organisation of all postgraduate educational activities for family doctors. The College was also asked to act as coordinator of the whole CME calendar for the PGMC.

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Other academic activities of note are also organised by the College. In the past these included:

- One-week **Teachers' Course in Family Medicine** held in March 1993, in collaboration with the Bedfordshire & Hertfordshire Faculty of the RCGP;
- One-week **Family Doctor Training Seminar on Community Psychiatry** co-organised in May 1994;
- **Weekend Workshop on Counselling in Family Practice** held in April 1995, in collaboration with the Primary Care Trust, Staines, UK, and the RCGP International Committee;
- **3-day Joint Seminar on Paediatrics and Obstetrics & Gynaecology** co-organised in November 1996.

COMMUNICATION & LINKS

In September 1990, the first issue of 'It-Tabib tal-Familja', the **Journal of the Malta College of Family Doctors**, was issued. Initially a humble four-page newsletter, this has now grown into a colour journal issued twice yearly on a regular basis, with eleven issues published by 1996. Dr Jean Karl Soler, the College's Secretary for Information, is its editor. Moreover, since 1995, a separate newsletter is being sent

to College members every one or two months to keep them informed of local and international educational activities of interest. An **Internet Website** was launched in February 1996, courtesy of Grazio Falzon's 'Malta Virtuali' in the USA. In October 1996, the site exchanged its host for TheSYNAPSE Network here in Malta at <http://www.synapse.net.mt/MCFD> - the webmaster is Dr Wilfred Galea, International Secretary of the College.

On the international front, the College has maintained the excellent relationship it always had with the **Royal College of General Practitioners**. A certificate dated 4 September 1990 presented to the Malta College by the RCGP through Dr Edwin Martin (then the RCGP's Malta Fellow) gives evidence to this. This certificate states that the RCGP 'regards the Malta College as a sister body that will set the standards of education in family medicine in Malta and as the body which will, where appropriate, give accreditation to doctors undertaking approved training for family medicine'. The RCGP's help resulted in the **Teachers' Course in Family Medicine** in 1993, the **Workshop on Counselling in Family Practice** in 1995, and the sponsorship of College representative Dr Philip Sciortino in an **International Course for Teachers of General Practice** in 1997-98.

The College also has close links with the **Canadian College of Family Physicians**, most especially with Professor Douglas Johnson who has given his unstinting help and support in all of the College's major projects, most recently in the development of the **Specialist Training Programme in Family Medicine**.

The College's membership of the **World Organisation of Family Doctors (WONCA)** was

boosted in February 1996 when two Council members, Dr Wilfred Galea and Dr Jean Karl Soler, were appointed to the **WONCA Working Party on Informatics**. Moreover, the College became a founder member in October 1995 of **WONCA Region Europe - the European Society of General Practice/Family Medicine**. Not only is College President Dr Denis Soler is a member of the **ESGP/FM Council**, but the College was honoured by the **ESGP** who invited two Council members to chair sessions in its **Prague Scientific Conference** during July 1997.

Since 1994, the College has been affiliated to **EQuIP, the European Working Party on Quality in Family Practice**, and to the **European General Practice Research Workshop (EGPRW)**, being a national college member of the latter. The College in fact hosted the **EGPRW meeting** in Malta in October 1996, and in 1997 Dr Jean Karl Soler was appointed to launch its website on the Internet. A reply is awaited to the College's application for membership with **EURACT, the European Academy of Teachers in General Practice**.

PRESENT & FUTURE

A **Family Doctor Directory**, initially drawn up in October 1994, is presently being revised and updated. Such a directory is just an interim step towards the College's ultimate aim of establishing a proper **Specialist Register** of family doctors who have undergone **Specialist Training in Family Medicine**.

After recommending a standard **Data Set for Computerised Medical Records** in 1996, the College is planning for the development of a full **Computerised Medical Records System** for family doctors by early 1998. Its aim is to facilitate good quality continuing care, health screening through recall sys-

tems, the keeping and exchange of statistics, and the performance of research and audit.

At present the College is working on the creation of a **culture for research** in family medicine, as it believes that it is through research that academic credibility and status can be developed further. The College has approved a **Research Policy and Planning Document** to promote research in Family Medicine in an organised way, to improve the status of the specialty, and enhance:

- The academic development and career prospects of family doctors,
- Knowledge and information on family practice, enabling plans for its future, and
- The health and well being of the population.

Although a **Policy Document** entitled 'The College - History and Future Development' was prepared for the College by (then) Honorary Secretary Dr Ray Busuttill in March 1993, this unfortunately was never published. Now, in line with the declared intention of the World Health Organisation to define a charter for General Practice/

Family Medicine in Europe, a draft **Policy Document on Family Medicine in Malta** has been drawn up for eventual publication. Its objective is to sensitise the public, the Government and University to the importance of family medicine, and to upgrade the status of the family doctor as a specialist in his/her own right.

The publication of this policy document is intended to serve as a springboard for the launch of a **Specialist Training Course in Family Medicine**. The College has drawn up such programme already, and the Royal Society of Medicine, the European General Practice Research Workshop (EGPRW) and the International Committee of the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) (amongst others) have confirmed their willingness to help in its implementation. What is needed to bring it to fruition is the necessary funding, together with the support of the University, the Department of Health and the Government.

The College has over the years repeatedly proposed to the relevant authorities the establishment, within the Faculty of Medicine, of a separate **Aca-**

demical Unit for Family Medicine. This would provide instruction in family medicine for **undergraduate medical students**, and would also be involved, in liaison with the College, in the setting up and running of **Post-graduate Vocational Training in Family Medicine**.

The function of the family doctor is today seen as being not merely that of making an appropriate diagnosis and providing the relevant treatment, but also of giving advice on the prevention of illness and on the protection of the patient's general health. In fact **Family Practice may be defined** as the provision of primary, continuing and whole patient care to individuals, families and their community. For a family doctor to work as such in the European Community today, he or she requires **specialist training in family medicine**. Irrespective of whether Malta becomes a member of the EC or not, the College has **committed** itself to providing the Maltese family doctor with such specialist training.

With thanks to Dr Ray Busuttill, Honorary Secretary 1990-94, for kindly providing details of the College's first years.