

A new normal for family doctors

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INTRODUCTION

We have now entered the second year of the COVID-19 Pandemic, and life is slowly returning to normal, or to the oft quoted 'new normal'.

Pandemic fatigue and a host of related health and social issues - including economic and psychological problems - are pushing society back towards some semblance of pre-pandemic normality.

There is no doubt that family doctors are going through a similar transition, yearning for a return to a life where a simple cough and sore throat do not trigger a chain of stress and anguish every time a patient steps into our clinics.

Having said that, there is no doubt that this pandemic has made us acutely aware how our workplace infection control and occupational health policies require a serious overhaul. There is also no doubt that 'standard infection' control practices during the years are obsolete at best, and family doctors have been taking their risk exposures for granted. In our waiting rooms, we get teenagers with meningitis mingling with elderly people with arthritis, and children with slapped cheek syndrome sitting beside pregnant women.

The new normal for family doctors would do well to include risk assessment for practices and clinics and the adoption of infection control measures.

COLLEGE ACTIVITIES

In the meantime, the Malta College of Family Doctors (MCFD) has been its usual busy self.

Major projects such as the latest update of the Specialist Training Programme in Family Medicine (STPFM) Curriculum have been completed, the

Assessment Team has been strengthened thanks to the recruitment of a group of high-calibre professionals, a new Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Team has been set up and a structure is now in place to host Vasco da Gama exchanges.

All this in addition to the small incremental changes carried out over the past few months - changes which though seemingly insignificant on their own have contributed to significant improvements in the way MCFD operates and the processes and projects it administers and coordinates.

THE STPFM CURRICULUM

The updated Curriculum for the Specialist Training Programme in Family Medicine has been finalised. A companion handbook is being planned to facilitate its use. The Curriculum is available online on the MCFD and STPFM websites and also as a hardbound version. This has been a massive undertaking, made possible by the fruitful collaboration of a team of dedicated GPs and GP trainees, both local and international - the latter being the esteemed members of the EGPRN (European General Practice Research Network) who kindly peer reviewed the various curriculum modules.

STPFM

2020 had originally been earmarked for re-accreditation of our Specialist Training Programme in Family Medicine by the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP). COVID-19 disrupted this process as the RCGP could not send its representatives to Malta. Discussions between the MCFD and the RCGP led to a successful re-

accreditation and renewal of the MCFD-Health Division-RCGP tri-partite agreement in both 2020 and 2021. In 2022 new discussions will determine the date of the next re-accreditation.

ASSESSMENT TEAM

In 2021, a fresh call was sent to gauge MCFD members' interest in joining the team. Dr. David Sammut, Dr. Marilyn Harney and Dr. Simone Deguara rejoined the team together with veteran Dr. Marco Grech and a new member, Dr. Jurgen Abela. Dr. Marco Grech was chosen as the new Assessment Lead.

Preparations for the MCFD Summative Assessment 2021 were already underway in the first quarter of 2021.

MCFD SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT

For the 2021 MCFD Summative Assessment, the Assessment Team recommended that the Recorded Consultation Assessment (RCA) should be the assessment format used to assess clinical skills and performance.

"This in view of the ongoing pandemic, thus limiting unnecessary exposure to both candidates and auxiliary staff needed to organise a CSA exam. Although the format is different, the standard expected of the candidates sitting for this exam are identical to those of the CSA" (Malta College of Family Doctors, 2021).

"It uses a format of pre-recorded consultations which provide a range of real-life patient's encounters in primary care as evidence of the level of competency in areas of patient care, along a broad base of the curriculum" (Malta College of Family Doctors, 2021).

CPD AND EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

2021 made it clear that online CPD is here to stay. There is no doubt that offline CPDs are far more enjoyable, allowing MCFD members to socialise and mingle more freely (and buffets definitely trump eating croissants in front of a laptop). I am confident that we will soon be planning a few of these traditional CPDs. In the meantime, the MCFD's focus is on online CPDs and its members can benefit from a series of lectures and seminars organised/endorsed by the MCFD.

MCFD members, both Specialists in Family Medicine and GP trainees are encouraged to participate in these CPD activities not just as passive recipients but also as active participants and contributors. Members of other specialties and professions will always be welcome contributors and guests; but MCFD also believes in CPDs from GPs to GPs. While a secondary care perspective will often inform GP education to various extents, we must not forget the specific learning needs and unique primary care perspectives of a GP can only be accurately addressed by a fellow GP. We must not forget the ever-increasing number of GPs with special interests, be it Women's Health, Palliative Care, Migrant Services, etc., which are providing Family Medicine and Primary Health Care with an abundance of GPs with valuable in-depth knowledge and experience in various medical fields - knowledge and experience which they can share with their peers.

PATIENT EDUCATION

To honour its commitment to educate the public, the MCFD created and distributed patient education leaflets on Flu, Common Colds and COVID-19. These were distributed at University, the Homes for the Elderly and among teachers.

The plan is for the MCFD to engage in more patient education initiatives, whether of its own initiative or on invitation, and in collaboration with other entities.

Such initiatives will take many forms and will not be limited solely to the creation and distribution of leaflets but will make use of other media.

MCFD members are encouraged to submit ideas and offer their expertise and participation in such initiatives.

TEACHERS' COURSE

The last Teachers' Course took place in late 2019. The COVID-19 Pandemic threw the MCFD yet another curveball in this regard. A face-to-face course being out of the question, a possible online version was discussed. The unanimous conclusion was that an online version would lack the robustness and validity of a good face-to-face course.

Now that COVID-19 restrictions are being eased off, plans are underway to organise an MCFD Teachers' Course in the first quarter of 2022. The MCFD is also interested in hosting a EURACT Level 1 Teachers' Course in Malta in the last quarter of 2022. Both of these courses should contribute significantly to the current pool of certified GP Trainers.

VASCO DA GAMA MOVEMENT

The Vasco da Gama Movement (VdGM) is the WONCA Europe Network for New and Future General Practitioners / Family Physicians.

The VdGM works with doctors who are training in the speciality of family medicine and those in the first five years after qualifying as family medicine specialists and provides young doctors with opportunities in expanding their education, research skills, policy-making, leadership qualities and international collaboration.

Thanks to the efforts of a local team of young enterprising family doctors and former GP trainees, MCFD is actively participating in the VdGM's programmes. The objective of the current project is to host foreign GP Trainees for a 2-week study visit in Malta. This would require the kind involvement of host practices in private practice and attachments in health centres. This project is already well under way and calls will

be sent in the coming months to identify host practices.

MCFD ELECTIONS

During the second quarter of 2021 a Call for President-Elect was issued and this was taken up by the current Honorary President, Dr Edward Zammit.

The term of this Council will expire towards the end of this year and calls for an election will be sent in December 2021 with the aim of having a new Council in place by mid-March 2022.

REFERENCE

Malta College of Family Doctors, 2021. *Membership of the Malta College of Family Doctors Recorded Consultation Assessment Handbook 2021*. Malta: Malta College of Family Doctors, Available from: <https://mcfcd.org.mt/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/RCA-Handbook-2021.pdf> (downloaded December 2021).

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