

Medical education in Malta: an update

Another academic year has come to an end, a year that has seen the finalisation of a new collective agreement for academic staff at the University of Malta, the initiation of a revamping exercise of the medical curriculum and the launching of the Foundation Program as well as Postgraduate Training Programmes in a number of medical specialities.

These events are, in general, perceived as beneficial but their implementation has mandated a number of solutions to problems arising out of these groundbreaking developments. Academic members of staff effectively join their counterparts in the UK who likewise have been faced with the task of modernising medical education, a task that has increased their administrative burden. It is expected that the planned curriculum changes should serve to further strengthen the small group teaching that has traditionally been the *forte* of our medical school. Increasing student numbers translate into a requirement for more tutors. Simultaneously, more widespread utilisation of case based learning, piloted in the Department of Medicine in recent years, superimposed on a platform of traditional teaching methods is planned.

The developments in postgraduate training have also meant an increase in the teaching and supervisory workload of a core of dedicated educators.

Such changes have served to highlight the need for continued training of academic staff in teaching skills and assessment methods. In fact a number of "Train the Trainers" courses have been organised for local staff members. The formal recruitment of qualified honorary staff who have over the years delivered education but not had Council appointments at the University is central to this exercise and a welcome and just acknowledgement of their past contributions. The multitude of changes mandate that quality assurance be rigorous with members of staff undergoing regular in-depth training and assessment in educational methods.

A further development in medical education has been the increasing interest in research. A number of under- and

postgraduate students at the University of Malta Medical School and Mater Dei Hospital are keen on careers in academic medicine as opposed to purely clinical career paths. This is indeed a positive development. Collectively, universities are generally at the forefront of research and development in their respective countries and Malta should be and is no exception.

Until recently local researchers have felt somewhat disadvantaged when competing for research funds against applicants from other larger European countries. There is now a commitment on the part of the EU to ensure that smaller countries, for example those in the Mediterranean region, be better positioned for competing for EU research funding. There have been a number of related initiatives to help ensure this. Given that population mobility is strongly promoted within the European Union, it is expected that disease incidence and prevalence change with changing demographics in the different countries. Researching health-related issues and disease in different populations thus becomes instrumental to the planning and delivery of healthcare across the different EU states. The implementation of such targeted research policies and funding will mean that local academics will be better placed to apply for European Union funding. Malta's position in the European Union is ideal for collaboration both with other countries in the Mediterranean region and in Europe in this regard.

These efforts in changing the face of medical education and in broadening the horizons of medical research carry with them the need for regulation, accreditation, and legislation to protect the ultimate stakeholder, namely the patient. Such regulatory measures may be regarded by some as a hindrance to the progression of medical education and knowledge because of the resultant bureaucracy and paper work. However, adherence to such guidelines and legislation is essential to ultimately ensure patient safety and standards in quality of care whilst enabling translational research to deliver state-of-the-art and cutting-edge technologies and treatment modalities to patients worldwide.

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