

President's Forum

by Adj Asst Prof Tan Tze Lee, President, 26th Council, College of Family Physicians Singapore

It has been 52 years since Singapore gained its independence, and 46 years since a few good men came together to make their dreams and aspirations of establishing a Singapore College of General Practitioners a reality.

In the early days, our esteemed predecessors had many noble ideals. We need to look no further than the articles in our College Constitution to see this. Our founding fathers' first aims were to advance the Art and Science of Medicine, by discussing medical and scientific problems, and running post-graduate education for general practitioners in the early days, now called family physicians. They were interested in high standards, and keen to encourage and help young doctors to prepare, qualify and establish themselves in family practice. High aspirations, selflessness, and always looking towards advancing the quality of family medicine for all of society were the hallmark of our college pioneers.

The college ran the first diplomate course in general practice/family medicine in the early 70's, and the first Collegiate Members of the College of General Practitioners, Singapore were newly minted in 1972, as MCGP(S). They established the first general practice journal in Singapore, then called simply "the GP", subsequently renamed the "Singapore Family Physician". Even in the early days, GPs had much interest in their community, with studies and reviews published in the journal. The College spearheaded all undergraduate and postgraduate education efforts for family medicine in the 1970s.

Fast forward to 2017, and we can see that the college has indeed come a very long way. We are now called the College of Family Physicians, Singapore. We run three well-structured courses, the graduate diploma in family medicine, (GDFM, the entry criteria for the Family Physician Register), the Master of Medicine, College route [MMed (FM)] and the Fellowship of the College of Family Physicians (FCFP). In our college convocation in November 2017, we celebrated with many of our trainees who had taken the challenge of FM training and been successful. For those who have yet to achieve this, persevere and press on, never give up, for the prize is within your grasp!

Healthcare needs in Singapore are evolving rapidly. We have one of the most admired healthcare systems in the world, yet we hear many grouses about the inadequacies of the system. Of particular concern is our rapidly ageing population, estimated to reach 900,000 in 2030, around 25% of the population. These changing demographics are already leading to many more challenges to our healthcare system, and the need for more and better trained family physicians is more urgent now than ever. But how do we attract our

young doctors to choose family medicine as a career? Is there a magic formula that can make family medicine irresistible to our newly minted medical officers?

Why is it that many medical students aspire to train in hospital medicine as opposed to work in the community as a family physician? The truth in part arose as a result of the government's focus on medical specialisation in the 70's and 80's. At the time, there was a need to build up our specialist expertise, and many specialist centres, like the National Heart Centre, National Cancer Centre, National Skin Centre, and the Singapore National Eye Centre were set up then. Specialists were glorified as bastions of the medical profession. The national media then had a fascination with the latest "advances" by the specialists, and this has imbued on the national psyche that specialisation in the key to having the "best" care. The subsequent lack of recognition and prestige of generalist doctors may further account for trainees choosing subspecialisation paths. The government did invest and develop the polyclinics islandwide, but GPs in private practice (comprising 80% of the primary care workforce) were left to develop their own systems.

There is a realisation now that, as the late Prof Barbara Starfield of Johns Hopkins University said so eloquently and we quote: - "there are lots of evidence that a good relationship with a freely chosen primary-care doctor, is associated with better care, more appropriate care, better health, and much lower health costs."¹ With our aging population and increasing chronic disease burden, well-trained FPs would be well placed to make a significant positive impact on the health of our nation. With proper costing and adequate funding, a strong primary care system comprising well-trained Family Physicians will prove to be the more cost effective solution for many questions in healthcare, as has been shown in many countries throughout the world.

The call for more well trained family physicians is now even more urgent than ever, as well as the need to build up community resources to better manage patients at home. Minister of Health, Mr Gan Kim Yong, in his 2017 Committee of Supply Budget Statement in March 2017, listed 3 key changes for a "future ready" healthcare system, (i) move beyond hospital to the community; (ii) move beyond quality to value; and (iii) move beyond healthcare to health.² We have seen some evidence of this move beyond hospital to the community, with myriad engagements of private practice GPs and FPs by the MOH in recent years, and various initiatives like the CHAS and Pioneer Generation medical benefit schemes.

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We have heard exhortations from the Director of Medical Services, Associate Professor Benjamin Ong, who highlighted the importance of primary care in his speech at the opening of the Asia Pacific Medical Education Conference (APMEC) in January 2017. Transformation of primary care, with the long term goal of "One Singaporean, One Family Doctor" encapsulates the "key role of family doctors as a trusted health partner of every Singaporean." He further added that with the increasing complexity of healthcare in primary care, "the professional upskilling of primary and community-based physicians through post-graduate Family Medicine training will no long be optional."³

What does that mean for us in Family Medicine? Is the Cinderella of our healthcare system about to take more of a centre stage? Will more resources be placed in the hands of the practitioners in primary care?

Will family medicine finally be recognised as a medical specialty in its own right?

There is hope yet, as Minister of State for Health, Mr Chee Hong Tat said in his speech at the SMC Physicians' Pledge

in September this year, "There remains an important need for different groups of specialists in our healthcare system, including larger numbers of doctors specialising in areas such as family medicine, internal medicine, geriatrics and palliative care."⁴ Or as MP for Tanjong Pagar GRC Dr Chia Shi-Lu said, "Greater recognition for family medicine-such as accrediting it as a speciality - is also welcome, to help to shed the impression that GPs and family physicians are but "cough and cold doctors".⁵

Let us make that our goal for 2018.

1. <http://bostonreview.net/barbara-starfield-the-primary-solution-doctors>
2. https://www.moh.gov.sg/content/moh_web/home/pressRoom/speeches_d/2017/speech-by-minister-for-health--mr-gan-kim-yong--at-the-moh-commi.html
3. https://www.moh.gov.sg/content/moh_web/home/pressRoom/speeches_d/2017/speech-by-a-prof-benjamin-ong--director-of-medical-services--min.html
4. https://www.moh.gov.sg/content/moh_web/home/pressRoom/speeches_d/2017/speech-by-mr-chee-hong-tat--senior-minister-of-state-for-health-2.html
5. <http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/big-read-specialists-or-gps-training-review-get-mix-right-just-what-doctor-ordered>

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Academic Writing Group LKC

by Dr Ng Chee Lian Lawrence, FCFP(S)

Research is an area which brings much fear to the family physician in clinical practice. For most of us, we have hardly any experience nor formal training in it during our undergraduate and clinical careers.

In early part of 2016, the LKC School of Medicine, under Prof Helen Smith, Dept of Family Medicine, started a monthly Saturday afternoon meeting group in a highly interactive, peer-support, small group format and the participants' objectives determines the course content.

It aims to help develop participants' scientific writing skills that will enable them to write clearly and meaningfully for a wide range of audiences and publish their research. Participants came from National Healthcare Group (NHG) and College of Family Physicians Singapore (CFPS).

At each meeting, we update on members writing endeavours, short presentation & an activity (e.g. questions, analysis of examples etc.)

Titles included From research to publication: Writing for publication; Getting published; The art & mastery of scientific writing.

Learning Objectives were:

- Understand the scientific writing process
- Reflect on what constitutes a research question and how it can be addressed in a scientific paper
- Organise and compose a manuscript in line with the IMRAD (Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion) and scientific journal requirements
- Understand the conventions of scientific writing
- Reflect on the ethics, authorship and conflict of interest in research

- Understand the peer-review process, including why manuscripts get accepted or rejected
- Learn how to reply to reviewers' comments
- Develop strategies for peer-reviewing papers

Course syllabus included:

1. What scientific writing looks like: scientific writing process
2. How to shape your writing: types of research, publications & journals
3. How to get published: developing a publication strategy
4. What to keep in mind: ethics, data management, authorship rules & conflicts of interest
5. How to write: style, drafts, peer-review & plagiarism
6. How to submit: letter to the editor, referencing, tables & figures
7. How to improve: peer-review, addressing comments & dealing with rejection
8. How to review: being a peer reviewer

The group of us included doctors from the NHG Polyclinics and members of the College, particularly those doing research for the Fellowship exams.

We enjoyed the more gradual and relaxed pace of teaching by Prof Helen and Prof Lorraine Tudor. Learning research was more fun and less painful this way. Through this article, we hope more of us can see the value of research and learn how to write masterfully for publication through participating in such courses. There is never quite a perfect moment to do it, except to embark on it first and perfecting it along the way!

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