

is to achieve specialist recognition of family medicine as a discipline. We are very glad for the strong support from the Ministry of Health for this and for the affirmation from our Permanent Secretary Mr Chan Yeng Kit during our Convocation Ceremony in November. I am happy to share that our proposal for Family Medicine Specialist recognition has been approved at the Family Physician Accreditation Board (FPAB). The culmination of a massive effort by all at the FPAB, we are especially grateful for the support and leadership of our chair, DMS Prof Kenneth Mak, whose wisdom and insight was invaluable.

Healthcare needs in Singapore are evolving rapidly. We have one of the most admired healthcare systems in the world, yet we hear of many grouches 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?

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. The Ministry of Health in 2017 first noted the concept of the 3 beyonds to make 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.

All this has been going on at breakneck speed, what with the myriad engagements of private practice GPs and FPs by the MOH in recent years, and various initiatives like the CHAS and Pioneer Generation health assistance schemes.

Transformation of primary care is key, with the long term goal of "One Singaporean, One Family Doctor". We aspire to earn that "key role of family doctors as a trusted health partner of every Singaporean." We are well aware that as primary healthcare becomes increasingly complex, "the professional upskilling of primary and community-based physicians through post-graduate Family Medicine training will no longer be optional." These words were spoken by our immediate past DMS Prof Benjamin Ong in 2017. They ring even more true today. Training and upskilling is indeed key to our development in Family Medicine.

The late Prof Barbara Starfield of Johns Hopkins University said so eloquently and I 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." Our aging population and increasing chronic disease burden desperately needs well-trained FPs, to take on the mantle and challenge to provide for the health of our nation. With proper costing and adequate funding, a strong primary care system comprising well-trained Family Physicians in Singapore will prove by far to be the more cost effective solution for the health needs of our city state.

As we approach the end of 2021, and look forward to the season's festivities and celebrations, we are grateful for the gentle easing of restrictions for dining and social gathering. This move is widely welcomed, with many of us looking forward to meeting face to face with our loved ones. However the emergence of novel variants of concern and waves of COVID infections in various countries reminds us of the fragility of our campaign against this virus. Let us take some time this season to spend precious moments with our loved ones, it is an investment well worth doing during these uncertain times.

I wish one and all good health, joy and every blessing for this Christmas and New Year!

■ CM

Do medical students in Singapore want to pursue General Practice and Family Medicine as a career?

by Prof Helen Smith, Dr Fang Yang, Family Medicine and Primary Care, Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine, NTU

A research study led by LKCMedicine's Professor of Family Medicine and Primary Care, Helen Smith has found that more than half of medical students in Singapore are likely to pursue a career in General Practice and Family Medicine (GPFM). There were others, however, who are uncertain whether this career path can offer sufficient job satisfaction and career progression opportunities.

The research team comprised of (from LKCMedicine) Research Fellow Dr Fang Yang; Visiting Senior Research Fellow Michael Soljak; Junior Doctor and former LKCMedicine Student Shawn Tan; and former LKCMedicine's Research Fellow Humairah Zainal.

To support Singapore's rapidly ageing population and the increasing need for chronic care, the MOH has announced

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the "Three Beyonds" strategy in 2017. A key thrust in the strategy is "Beyond Hospital to Community" which involves shifting the care burden from hospitals to the community and hence the need to recruit more doctors into GPFM.

With a grant from the National Medical Research Council to investigate this issue, Prof Smith and her team conducted an online survey to investigate the likelihood of medical students choosing GPFM careers and factors related to their career preferences. The online survey was sent to all three medical schools and was completed by almost 400 students.

The study found that that medical students in Singapore value job satisfaction and career development opportunities most. They also perceive GPFM as being more likely to offer reasonable working hours and closer patient relationships than specialty medicine, although it is less likely to offer the career advancement potential of other medical fields.

On the downside, the students reported having encountered derogatory comments about GPFM during their undergraduate training. These comments include doing mundane and repetitive work, a non-competitive career and that GPFM in general has poor clinical competence.

These findings have direct implications for Singapore's efforts

to increase the number of doctors working in GPFM. To support the expansion of GPFM, medical schools in Singapore are training more doctors and have increased the proportion of residency openings in generalist fields, including family medicine. While the teams' findings of at least half of the students expressed a likelihood in pursuing GPFM were optimistic compared to some overseas reports, our findings highlight that even amongst this group there were similar concerns about whether GPFM careers can fulfil their need for job satisfaction and career development opportunities compared to other medical fields.

What then can be done to ensure that Singapore has a GPFM workforce to meet the changing needs of the population's demographic and improving the interface between primary, secondary and tertiary healthcare?

At a medical school level, the curriculum can be clearer in articulating the expectations from GPFM careers, provide better and increased opportunities for first-hand experience of GPFM. There should also be GPFM practitioners in teaching as there is no reason why a family doctor cannot teach the basic management of common acute and chronic diseases, and not always depend on organ specialists to do so.

Teaching should also highlight the depth and breadth of GPFM, such as the intellectual challenges involved when making diagnoses early in the development of symptoms and managing people with chronic disorders. With a better understanding of GPFM, students will be more aware of the potential impact of GPFM on patients' well-being and the many opportunities for innovation and research.

The perennial challenge to GPFM in Singapore has been the resistance to recognise family medicine as a medical specialisation. This has persisted despite MOH's recognizing the urgent need to strengthen primary care as the foundation of its healthcare system. This conflict may inadvertently send the message that GPFM is essential but unworthy of recognition, potentially deterring interested medical students from pursuing this career choice.

Encouragingly, this research revealed that many students still express interest in GPFM careers. It is thus imperative for LKCMedicine as a medical school to promote and sustain this interest by providing plentiful opportunities for students to discover and develop their interest in GPFM. A highly-skilled and motivated GPFM workforce therefore is one of the keys to achieve the "3 Beyonds" and bringing our healthcare system to a level that will effectively care for everyone who needs it.

■ CM

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