

2022

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As we said our goodbyes to 2021, many of us looked with anticipation to 2022 and the hope that it holds for us. We had just held our celebration of the 50th anniversary of the College in December 2021 and that was a wonderful time for all of the family medicine fraternity. We looked back on the achievements of the last 50 years and gave thanks for all our dedicated volunteers who had contributed so much to our College programmes. Family physicians have been at the forefront of many of the initiatives of our primary care evolution and going forward will constitute the backbone of Singapore's commitment towards population health.

Traditionally, health care systems tend to focus on treating diseases only once they have been diagnosed. Although Singapore has one of the highest life expectancies globally, in the latter years Singaporeans tend to be in poor health. There is indeed a disparity between life expectancy and health adjusted life expectancy. This is a situation that needs to be much improved, and population health seeks to address that.

So, what is population health? Population health is focused on health promotion, preventing illness long before it happens. The ultimate aim is not just to help patients live longer, but longer in a better state of health.

There is a need for a paradigm shift in our thinking of healthcare. Most people live life as usual and go to the doctors only when they feel unwell. This approach is piecemeal and only addresses illness after the fact, and oftentimes is already late in the healthcare continuum. Traditional healthcare only makes up around 15% of a person's total health; so what do we do as regards to that remaining 85%? That is where population health comes in.

The 85% depends on a whole host of factors, often coined as the social determinants of health. These include socioeconomic factors such as income, education, social networks, living environments and so on. It's only by addressing these very important but often neglected factors that we can really make a difference to the total health of our patients.

All this may seem very high brow and you may say that it is way above us as primary care practitioners, and I admit I felt very much the same way as these concepts are way above what I as an individual doctor can achieve. A useful way to look at this was very helpfully summed up by Dr Edwin Low from SingHealth, who said that what "we're trying to achieve as doctors is a deeper, wider appreciation of the social dimensions of health, asking "what matters to you?", as opposed to "what's the matter with you?". It is only when you understand what is important that you can build conversation around it."

So, it is not about just trying to find out what's wrong with our patient from a healthcare point of view, but actually to look at what is important to them in their whole of life experience so that we are better able to tailor services and tools for them to improve their health and prevent illness. It is a very tall order, to go from a light touch approach to a whole of society approach, but I believe we are getting there.

It will require a lot of collaboration between the different agencies, both public and private, in order to make this work. Already the public health institutions have in place various schemes, but as the GPs make up almost 80% of our manpower in primary care, it only makes sense that we should also be fully engaged, enabled and supported to provide this care.

We will need to see more collaborations between the healthcare clusters, private practitioners, healthcare professionals and community partners like Social Service Agencies and grassroots organizations. In an ideal scenario, all of these agencies and partners will be fully coordinated and integrated and we will be able to provide a care continuum for patients that will the envy of the world!

I wish one and all a happy, healthy and successful year of the Tiger!

<https://www.singhealthdukenus.com.sg/news/tomorrows-medicine/population-health-a-new-way-forward>
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