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World Family Doctor Day 2023

Family Doctors: The Heart of Healthcare

by Dr Wong Tien Hua, Vice President, College of Family Physicians Singapore

Mr Ong Ye Kung, Minister for Health, past presidents, council, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you very much for joining us tonight as we celebrate WONCA's World Family Doctor Day. We are indeed very privileged to have with us tonight as our Guest-of-Honour Mr Ong Ye Kung, Minister for Health.

I am Dr Wong Tien Hua, Vice President of the College and I will be delivering the welcome address on behalf of the College President. A/Prof Tan Tze Lee is unable to join us this evening due to the recent passing of his beloved father. On behalf of the Council of College of Family Physicians, I offer our deepest condolences.

The first World Family Doctor Day (WFDD) was celebrated on 19 May 2010 in Cancun, Mexico at the meeting of the World Organization of Family Doctors (or WONCA for short). In Singapore, the College of Family Physicians held our first World Family Doctor Day dinner in 2014, and it has been the main highlight event on our College calendar ever since, disrupted only by the COVID Pandemic.

Our College has a long relationship with WONCA. We hosted two WONCA world conferences in Singapore in 1983 and 2007, and we will be hosting the WONCA Asia Pacific Regional Conference next year in 2024 at Raffles City Convention Centre, in conjunction with the Singapore Primary Care Conference 2024.

World Family Doctor Day has become an annual celebration that recognises the central role of Family Doctors in delivering personal, comprehensive, and continuous healthcare to our patients.

World Family Doctor Day is also a day to acknowledge and appreciate the progress made in family medicine and the exceptional contributions of primary care teams globally. In Singapore, we honour and celebrate the tireless efforts of our family doctors and primary care professionals in improving healthcare through their contributions to teaching, research, and leadership in Primary Care.

The theme for this year is: "Family Doctors: The Heart of Healthcare". I cannot think of a more timely theme for World Family Doctor Day.

In Singapore, we are at the cusp of what some have described as “the most far-reaching and significant health policy reforms since Singapore's independence”. We are shifting away from a focus on illness to an emphasis on disease prevention and health promotion. Healthier SG is about to be launched in July 2023, and one of its key elements is to mobilise our network of family doctors to deliver preventive and holistic care for Singapore residents.

So, how does our theme “Family Doctors: The Heart of Healthcare” apply to Healthier SG? I can name four areas:

1. Our Long-term relationships with our patients support Healthier SG: Family doctors are typically the first point of contact for patients seeking medical care. We provide continuous and comprehensive care to patients throughout their lives, offering personalised care and support. Healthier SG will seek to enrol residents with a single family doctor, and it is designed with built-in incentives for the patient and the doctor to forge a long-term relationship.

2. Our Holistic approach: Family doctors take a holistic approach to healthcare, considering not just a patient's physical health, but also their emotional, social, and psychological well-being. We are trained to focus on preventive health initiatives, we are best sited to do health screening and early detection of illnesses. This is why preventive health screening is such an integral component of Healthier SG.

3. Our emphasis on Care Coordination: Family doctors serve as a central point of coordination for a patient's healthcare needs, and we work with other healthcare providers, such as specialists and hospitals, to ensure that patients receive the best possible care. Under Healthier SG, GPs now work together under a Primary Care Network, which provides the support needed for more services to be delivered by the clinic. Formal links with Regional Health Systems translates to smoother referrals and communication, improving care coordination.

4. Finally, our role in Advocacy and education: Family doctors are advocates for our patients, helping them to navigate the healthcare system and access the resources they need. They also educate patients about their health, including how to manage chronic conditions, make healthy lifestyle choices, and prevent illness.

With the upcoming IT enhancements, family doctors will now be able to give personalised advice directly to patients via the Healthhub apps on their mobile phones. Under Healthier SG, patients who enrol with a family doctor can schedule a visit to come up with a shared health plan that incorporates health prevention and actionable targets.

Still on the topic of education, this is where the College of Family Physicians has a major role to play.

For Healthier SG, we have worked closely with MOH and MOHT to come up with a series of nine training webinars to cover all aspects of Care Protocols. The first webinar commenced on 2 May with 740 participants, and we will run the series every Tuesday night from 9:30pm-10:30pm until 27 June. We will repeat the training cycle if required. All the webinars are anchored by our own College council members, thus this whole series is led by Family Doctors.

As Singapore's healthcare landscape changes, so too must our programmes evolve to address future needs.

Our College mission is to train our family doctors, and we have been doing so ever since we started training the first batch of GPs in 1971. Our courses have since evolved, and we now provide courses in the Graduate Diploma of Family Medicine, the College Master of Medicine (FM) course, and our Fellowship course, which represents the pinnacle of self-actualisation for the Family Physician. As Singapore's healthcare landscape changes, so too must our programmes evolve to address future needs. We have identified the need for more in-depth training in medical ethics of family medicine, and we are working hard to introduce more of such components into our programmes.

We are able to run these courses only because of the sheer dedication, commitment, and spirit of volunteerism of our trainers and tutors. It is only through their efforts that we have been able to train so many family physicians, and tonight we honour many of them for their years of service to the family medicine community.

On that note, I wish you an enjoyable and wonderful evening of celebration.

Dr Wong Tien Hua
Vice President, 28th Council (2021-2023)
College of Family Physicians Singapore