

COLLEGE CME

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The College of Family Physicians, Singapore (formerly known as The College of General Practitioners, Singapore) was officially registered on 30th June 1971. This came about two years after a committee was formed by the Singapore Medical Association "to look into the feasibility of forming a Higher Academic Body of General Practitioners in Singapore". The main objective of the College was to promote a high standard of family medicine/general practice in Singapore, and one of the most important activities was the provision of continuing medical education.

Even before the College was formed, the Society of General Practice, the forerunner of the College, was already holding talks and lectures. But these were sporadic and ad-hoc, and usually not well attended.

IN THE 70S

For a start the College held two-hourly weekly lecture sessions for the members, and about 20 members turned out week after week to revise and upgrade their knowledge. We did not have lecturers in family medicine or general practice, but we were fortunate to have friends and colleagues who were specialists who willingly gave their time and effort to hold these lectures, without any honorarium paid. Most of these sessions were held in the Alumni Association for which no fees or charge were collected.

By 1973, regular lectures and clinical sessions were held on Sunday afternoons from 2.00 pm to 4.00 pm at different hospitals, and group

discussions were held regularly at the Alumni Medical Centre on Fridays from 8.30 pm to 10.30 pm. The lecturers were the Who's Who of Singapore medical fraternity, colleagues like Prof Wong Hock Boon, Prof Khoo Oon Teck, Prof Phoon Wai Onn, Prof Seah Cheng Siang, Dr Wong Yip Chong, Dr Feng Pai Hsui, Dr Tan Bok Yam, Dr Chew Chin Hin, Dr Leong Si Chin, Dr John Thambyah, Dr Chan Sing Kit and many, many others.

Many of our members were from Malaysia, and they were most active in promoting continuing education. The Kluang Study Group was formed by a small but dedicated band of family physicians. Out of a total of twelve practitioners, eleven were members of the College. They met regularly with each other and with their hospital colleagues with a common objective of improving medical and health care in their town.

In October 1973 they held a "Teach-in" on the Current Problems in Cardiology in Kluang, Malaysia to which other members of the College were invited. Their enthusiasm influenced doctors in the other towns, and a "Teach-in" was held later that year by the Johore Postgraduate Centre, founded by Datuk Dr Lim Kee Jin, the State Physician of Johore.

The College felt that an examination specifically for family physicians/general practitioners was necessary for these doctors to assess themselves in their continuing education. Such examinations were by then well established in countries like United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. Our first Diplomate Examination was held in November 1972. By 1977 the MCGPS was recognised by the Singapore Medical Council as an additional registrable qualification.

In-depth courses, seminars and talks with audio-visual aids were introduced and examination-oriented refresher courses were held

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to help those intending to take the Diplomate Examination.

The Ministry of Health's Primary Care Division held weekly Thursday lunch-time sessions initially at Maxwell Road OPD through the initial efforts of Dr S Devi in the Ministry of Health. These include talks, discussion and tape sessions on topics of Family Medicine/General Practice. Later, the sessions were "regionalised" so that teaching sessions were also held in Still Road, Clementi and Bukit Merah Polyclinics.

During this period, the College premises were refurbished, and well documented books, tapes and audio-visual cassettes library was established for the members and all general practitioners. This was done through donations from the Reuben Meyer Trust and other well-wishers.

In September 1973, the College was bold enough to hold the Joint Colleges Conference in Singapore. The participating Colleges were the Royal College of General Practitioners, Australia, The College of General Practitioners Malaysia, and The College of General Practitioners Singapore. It was a great success in terms of scientific programme and attendance, and doctors in Singapore were given the opportunity to attend the plenary sessions and workshops, and to listen to world leaders in Family Medicine/General Practice.

Negotiations about educational facilities have also been taking place for some time between representatives of the College and officials of the Ministry of health, and signs of fruition were beginning to appear. The following quotation from the Straits Times (22nd September 1973) described the situation very clearly:

"The new scheme, which is the result of talks between the College and the Health Ministry, will offer to the established doctor opportunities to

keep pace with advances in medical knowledge and techniques in the disciplines of his choice, and prepare the new intending GP the better to serve his patients. Thus the houseman who plans to enter private practice at the end of his year's service in the hospitals may, while still a medical officer in Government service, be given postings in the particular disciplines relevant to general practice. The practising GP may express his preference for the branch of medicine in which he wishes to improve his knowledge. To enable them to continue their post-graduate education, facilities will be available to them at the following hospitals: Outram Road, Thomson Road, Tan Tock Seng, Alexandra, Middleton and Middle Road. A system of posting could be worked out between the doctors and the Ministry, which would be suitable for both sides. The scheme will be purely voluntary. On the basis of its progress a more organised and systematic programme may be planned later."

IN THE 80S

Between 1981 and 1983, the number of update courses were increased to 2 per year, and then to 3 per year as more disciplines were introduced. From 1983, a certificate of attendance was introduced and awarded to doctors who have attended at least 80 percent of each of the 6 modules of update coursed in 2 to 3 years. This was then made a requirement for the Diplomate Examination.

In 1985, an initial attempt was made to conduct a 2-year cycle programme for the whole field of medicine relevant to Family Medicine/General Practice. We ran 6 modules and 3 weekend seminars in the two years. We had difficulty trying to accommodate all the areas without unduly increasing the number of modules. The solution was to combine two or more areas in one module. Figure 1 taken from pages 70-71 in the Singapore

Family Physician 1987 Vol XIII No 2 shows a sample of the programme during this period. These were called "The Update Courses".

In 1987 recognition of Family Medicine as a distinct academic discipline was firmly established with the formation of the Department of Community, Occupational and Family Medicine (COFM) in the National University of Singapore. The Division of Family Medicine was headed by A/Prof Goh Lee Gan who was then a practising general practitioner. The close collaboration between the University and the College was beneficial to both organisations in hybridizing and balancing what was relevant in the contribution of from academic family medicine to family medicine practice and vice versa.

In 1988 a Steering Committee on Family Medicine was formed with tripartite representation from the Ministry of Health, the Department of COFM and the College. A pilot traineeship programme was organised for Government Medical Officers who had intention of pursuing a career in primary care or family practice. The family medicine trainees attended a modular course of 64 sessions over 2 years on Saturday afternoons. Other doctors were encouraged to attend these Saturday modular sessions as CME.

IN THE 90S

The Update Courses were conducted from 1987 to 1996. Three such courses conducted on Friday evenings from 1987 to 1995. In 1996 two courses were conducted. The attendance was around 50 participants for each course.

In the 1990s, the restructuring process in the government hospitals resulted in greater autonomy and a greater need to show productivity. One of the avenues to productivity is to link with GPs to

1987/1988

Module A:

1st quarter – Family Medicine, Paediatrics and O & G

Module B:

2nd quarter – Surgery, Orthopaedics & Anaesthesia

Module C:

3rd quarter – Internal Medicine I; practice management

1988/89

Module D:

1st quarter – Internal Medicine II; practice management

Module E:

2nd quarter – Geriatrics, Psychiatry, Family Medicine

Module F:

3rd quarter – Minor specialties, Occupational Medicine

Fig 1. College CME Programme,
1987-89 – The Update Courses

be the preferred referral destinations. There was thus greater interest in hospital departments to provide CME for GPs.

The College was invited to be a nominal sponsor and to contribute suggestions for topics and the focus that will benefit GPs. The type of CME also moved from straight single topic lectures to seminar, workshops and hands-on courses. The result is a new symbiotic relationship between the College and the various hospital departments from College-personal links with specialists and College-hospital department links of the 1970s and 1980s to hospital departmental-College and institutional-College or specialist body-College links for the provision of CME for the GPs.

This new link does not replace the College-specialist links of either individual specialist contacts or hospital departments, but certainly the new links augment the quantity of relationships between GPs and specialists in CME and CPD programmes for the practicing GPs. The number of activities where the College is a nominal sponsor as a measure of this new link, rose from three in 1991 to twenty-three in 2000.

With the development of CME activities driven from the institutions with the College participating as nominal sponsors and advisors on CME topics, the need for College to be the key driver for the Update Courses diminished. Hence, there were no more College's Friday evening Update Courses conducted after 1996.

It is clear that CME providers for the GPs are much more plural than compared to the 1970s. Also, the content is not just drug talks but activities that will enhance the knowledge and skills of the practicing doctors. Examples are the surgical updates and O&G ultrasound courses. In the 2000s, both the College and the institutions will seek each other to provide not only CME but meaningful CPD activities to level up the GPs.

The College took charge of administering the national Singapore Medical Council - CME (SMC-CME) programme from 1993 to the end of 1999. Since Jan 2000, SMC has taken back the administration of the national CME programme with the launch of the online SMC-CME programme. The College continues as a member of the SMC's Education Committee to oversee the new national CME programme for GPs/Family Physicians and plays an important role in the accreditation of national CME programme for GPs/Family Physicians.

CONFERENCES

Conferences may be regarded as CME carnivals. The College has held yearly conference on with focus on different subjects. The most important achievement must be the holding of the 10th WONCA World Conference for Family Physicians in Singapore. It was then the largest medical conference ever to be held in Singapore. More than 2,500 people from all over the world attended the

conference. The College has set itself to provide a repeat performance come 2007, when it will host the 2007 Wonca World Conference for Family Physicians.

In 1988 the College organised its first Annual Scientific Conference, officiated by the Deputy Director Medical Services (Hospital), Dr Chew Chin Hin. This year, the theme of the 2001 Annual Scientific Conference is "Training The Family Physician", a fitting theme for the College's 30th Anniversary.

CME RESOURCES

An account of the College CME would not be complete with a mention of the Singapore Family Physician and its Home Study Section. The publication is the College's official publication. Through the years, its quarterly publications have been a chronicle and self-directed learning resource for family doctors in their CME efforts. Its home study section focuses on review articles and quizzes to teach the brains of the reader. With the impending advent of on-line CME programmes, the Singapore Family Physician will need to integrate its role with such on-line programmes.

CONCLUSIONS

In the space of thirty years, the College CME has blossomed from the lunch time lectures driven by the College to a plethora of activities ranging from to symposias and skills training workshops driven by the College, specialist bodies and institutions. Self-directed learning from hard copy journals will soon be supplemented by e-learning. All these are necessary in providing the resources for the family doctor in the twenty-first century. The College needs to be a key driver in these efforts.