

## DEVELOPMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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“No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.”

– John Donne

This quotation epitomizes the connectedness that the College of Family Physicians, Singapore has enjoyed all the thirty years since its formation in 1971. In those early days when a band of doctors led by Dr Wong Heck Sing, Chairman of the Pro-tem Committee of the Singapore College, felt the need for an academic body for the general practitioners/family physicians in Singapore, they sought help from countries far away that had by then gone in the same direction of forming their academic bodies for family medicine – the United Kingdom and Australia. The requests for help were very willingly answered by these colleagues initially from the UK and later from Australia.

Lord Hunt of Fawley, representing the Royal College of General Practitioners, visited Singapore with some of his College officials and helped put together the initial Constitution of the infant college in Singapore, drawing from the early experiences of the Royal College itself. There were also discussions on the need for some form of examinations for doctors wanting to upgrade themselves and achieve some academic recognition.

For this, the fledgling college looked also to the Australian College for help. Australia readily answered Singapore's call for advice and the format of the early MCGPS (Member, College of General Practitioners, Singapore) Examination, the result of the many visits and meetings between

representatives of the two bodies.

Throughout the next 15 – 18 years, the local college continued to maintain close relationships with these two colleges particularly in the area of the MCGPS Examinations by way of inviting the overseas external examiners as invigilators.

It was only in 1980, when the Singapore College had a team at the 9th Wonca World Conference in New Orleans to bid for the 10th Wonca World Conference that the scope of international relations for the College suddenly expanded as the then currently young college council members met and interacted with GPs/FPs from the many countries at the conference. The 3 years between winning the bid and hosting the 10th Wonca World Conference in 1983 in Singapore, gave the College then a tremendous amount of exposure to international relations. The many contacts that needed to be made for invitations to official representatives, plenary speakers, chairpersons, free-paper presenters and delegates, all gave the organizers in the local host college a good and refreshing feel of the international flavour of GP/FM. The 10th Wonca World Conference turned out to be a success beyond the expectations of the host College in more ways than one and paved the way for more and more international involvement by the College from then on. The credibility gained by the College from holding that conference, led to its involvement in Wonca (The World Organisation of Family Doctors) in the Asia-Pacific Region initially and later at the highest level of the Executive Committee of the world body.

In 1986, at the 11th Wonca World Conference in London, a representative from the Singapore College was appointed the Regional Vice-President (RVP) for the Asia-Pacific to help the world body

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look into the development of GP/FM and expand its involvement in the region. That led the way for the College to build strong and close relationships with the academic bodies of GPs/FPs in the region particularly in South east Asia, namely with our colleagues in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Myamma and further afield with Australia, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea and later China. It is perhaps with the neighbouring countries in the Asia-Pacific that the Singapore College has been most closely connected in the last 10 years beginning with the formation of the Wonca Working Party on Family Medicine Education at the Bali Asia-Pacific Regional Conference in 1991. That forum provided opportunities for countries in the Asia-Pacific to get together and learn from each other the factors influencing the development of general practice/family medicine in each country. Much credit is due to doctors and teachers like Prof Wesley Fabb, Dr Clarke Munroe, A/Prof Zorayda Leopando and A/Prof Goh Lee Gan for keeping the connections going. Through the forum of medical education, Dr Nurul Islam from Bangladesh also became connected with the Singapore College and together Bangladesh and Singapore participated in the spreading of the 'family medicine message' to the South-Asia countries of Pakistan, India and Nepal.

The 6 years that the Singapore College representative held the RVP post paved the way for involvement at an even higher level – the World Executive Committee of Wonca. As the Member of Executive-at-large for 3 years, then as Honorary Treasurer for the next 3 years, the Singapore College through its representative was able to contribute to the mission and objectives of the world body. For the small size that it is, the contribution by the Singapore College to the world

body can be said to be fairly significant and underlies the fact that organizational size is not what determines international involvement but rather the commitment to be involved and to go for the long haul in international relations.

In the period of over a decade (mid 1980s to end 1990s) of international involvement, the College in Singapore has gained for itself a reputation for dependability, helpfulness, respectability and a willingness to share its experience and expertise in the development of GP/FM as a distinct discipline in medicine. This fact is further exemplified by the current involvement of some members of the College in the activities of the Singapore International Foundation in its healthcare development programmes in Indonesia and Myanmar.

The high regard that the international community of GPs/FPs have for the Singapore College, has of late resulted in two very significant developments and accolades it has been showered with. Firstly, the College was again successful in its bid to host the 18th Wonca World Conference in 2007. This is a historical first for any college to host a world conference for the second time. It reinforces the confidence, faith and trust the other colleges/academies of GP/FM around the world have for the Singapore College. With the larger and newer facilities now available in Singapore for large conferences and with the aid of IT in communications, the 2007 conference will very likely surpass the 1983 conference in academic quality, number of participants and degree of success.

The second accolade given to the College, in the area of international involvement, is the honour and privilege of hosting the Secretariat of the World Organisation of Family Doctors in its

premises and to have a past president of the College as the new Chief Executive Officer for the organization on the retirement of Prof Wesley Fabb. With this double honour of being host to the conference and the secretariat also comes the onerous responsibility of continuing commitment to greater international involvement and sharing. The commitment to the conference in 2007 is for six years of preparations and planning as well as financial outlay. The commitment as host to the secretariat is for at least nine years which fortunately involves only floor-space in the College office and no other form of financial support.

In conclusion, the College of Family Physicians, Singapore can justifiably be proud of its record on international relations and involvement. With a history of only 30 years behind it and the fact that the College is among

the smallest in the 'Wonca Family' in terms of subscription-paying members, it serves to demonstrate that small organizations can play significant roles in the world affairs of international organizations. What is important is the will to be involved, the sense of global responsibility, the support of the members in the organization and the goodwill to be friends to all in the fraternity at the international level. In this respect the College must record its thanks and gratitude to all past presidents and council members who have had the wisdom to place importance in international relations as part of the College's ongoing objectives. In a similar vein, the College should also express its thanks and gratitude to all sister colleges/academies of GP/FM in the international 'Wonca Family' for the trust, friendship, guidance and support given to it and for allowing it to play its part in the international milieu.