



PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

Becoming Vocationally Trained Family Physicians

The vocational training programme leading to Diplomate membership of the College (MCGP) began with the founding of the College 31 years ago. The first National University of Singapore (NUS) examination for the Masters in Family Medicine MMed (FM) degree to replace the MCGP was held in 1993, marking a new benchmark of vocational training. In the same year, the name of the Singapore college was changed from 'College of General Practitioners' to 'College of Family Physicians' to better reflect the adoption of Family Medicine (FM) as a discipline. The challenge ahead for the FM fraternity is to work towards further acceptance of the discipline of FM by the medical profession, the public and the government on par with the other medical specialties.

The MMed (FM) degree is a rigorous benchmark achieved by 180 doctors to date. The FM leadership has the vision that the journey to excellence could be made less onerous if it can be a two-step development for those who wish to choose a less compressed course of development. It is with this in mind that the Graduate Diploma in Family Medicine (GDFM) was launched in 1999 to fill the important alternative first step of vocational training in FM. The college leadership hopes that all doctors in primary care will aspire to take it. Of the pioneer batch of 1999-2001, 40 doctors were awarded the GDFM last year. 100 more are presently in training.

Of course some Family Physicians may be contented to stop at the diploma level. That is all right as he or she can be satisfied that professional development has taken place. Over time, a proportion of GDFM holders may choose to take up the learning journey again to the Masters level. For those who have Masters, there is the 2-year fellowship programme and beyond that, further clinical training to hone the leader, clinician and trainer. A career path to excellence is thus available to all. Table 1 gives an overview of these vocational training programmes.

It will be useful to position all these programmes in

relation to the work that family physicians could now do and be recognized for. The GDFM, Masters and College Fellowship awards are professional pre-requisites in career development upon which other eligibility criteria, for example administrative and leadership attributes, are added. The term, "Family Physician" is now a term that defines those doctors vocationally trained in FM. These doctors are now put to work to provide extended and enhanced clinical services to patients. Some family physicians are taking the extra step to develop expertise in these areas by completing graduate diplomas (such as that in Geriatric Medicine and Psychotherapy from NUS), by clinical attachments and/or mentorship by experts in those fields.

It may be pertinent to quote here what Professor Ian McWhinney wrote in 'A Textbook of Family Medicine' 2nd edition page 25, "Because the family physician is a generalist, this does not mean that all family physicians have identical knowledge and skills. All of them share the same commitments to patients. By virtue of special interest or training, however, a physician may have knowledge that is not shared by colleagues. In any group of physicians, this can be a source of enrichment. One may be skilled in reading ECGs, another may have a special interest in child health or the care of elderly patients. The important point is that this should not lead to fragmentation... Family physicians may be differentiated but family medicine should not fragment. If it were to do so, the role of the generalist would be lost."

The FM vocational training programme is now developed to be flexible enough to cater to doctors with different needs and aspirations. Recognition is given for attainment of each stage of development. Crafted in this manner, vocational training like continuing medical education (CME) can continue through the professional life of family physicians. (Table I)

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Table 1: Overview of the Family Medicine Training Programmes (FMTP) in Singapore

	Family Medicine Training Programmes (FMTP)			
	GDFM	Masters		Fellowship
		Programme A	Programme B	
Entry requirements	1 year as medical officer (MO) or GP	At least 2-year MO & selected for Ministry of Health Traineeship programme	GDFM and 2 years primary care postings OR 4 years primary case postings	MMed-MCFP & actively involved in FM clinical practice, teaching & professional development
Duration	2 years off-the-job training	3 years on-the-job 2 year hospital postings & 1 year primary care	2 years off-the-job training	2 years off-the-job training
Supervising Body	Institute of FM CFPS	NHG & Singhealth polyclinics in 3rd year	Division of Graduate Medical Studies, NUS	Institute of FM CFPS
FMTP Modular Courses	8 quarterly modules each comprising of distance learning & 4 workshops covering whole-person medicine, systems and practice management.			
Tutorials & small group meetings	8 tutorials based on quarterly themes	10 Combined Rounds & 10 monthly tutorials	20 Combined Rounds, 40 weekly tutorials, 20 clinical rounds	20 FMFP meetings held monthly
Courses	3 mandatory courses: Principles & Practice (P&P); Communication & Counselling (C & C); & Exam Revision;	Short skills courses conducted by polyclinics;	1-week full-time Hospital Attachment	3 mandatory courses viz. Method of Instruction, Audit & Research Methodology;
	BCLS & 2 electives	BCLS & 2-week fulltime MMed Revision Course in hospitals		Clinical Elective
Course Work	Distance learning & tutorial assignments	6 case commentaries 1-week practice audit		Log book documenting learning, clinical work, research & teaching involvement
Summative Assessment by	Division of Postgraduate Medical Studies, FM Committee National University of Singapore			Censor Board CFPS
Format Of Assessment	MCQ & KFP	MCQ, MEQ & spot/slide examination		Exit Interview
	Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE)	2 long cases in Paed & IM 4 short cases in Paed, IM, OG & either Surgery or Orthopaedics		
College Membership Eligibility	Ordinary Membership	Collegiate Membership		Fellowship
Professional Recognition	Certified Family Physician	Senior Family Physician		Consultant Family Physician