

College Special Interest Groups

Special Interest Groups (SIGs) were announced at the FM Convocation 2003 to enhance the clinical skills of family physicians. Drs Tan Yew Seng and Tan Boon Yeow, chairmen of the mental health and elder care groups respectively provide overview of activities.

Mental Health SIG

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What is mental health and how to attain mental health?

Research has begun to uncover some genetic, biochemical and neuro-structural basis for disorders like obesity and depression. In spite of this, lifestyle and problems of living issues are still equally important processes in such diseases.

These are but two of the many ailments with the psychological and social ramifications that present to the family physician. The others include affective conditions such as anxiety and depression, behavioral conditions such as smoking, substance/alcohol abuse and eating disorders, poorly defined entities like "stress of daily living" and inevitable responses to medical illnesses in particular chronic illnesses like diabetes mellitus.

Collectively, these conditions can be construed as "psychosocial or emotional burden" of our patients in family practice.

It is only when we actively address these various forms of "mental unwellness", and not just the well-defined ones, that we will be able to help our patients attain "mental health". The term "mental health" is used here in its broadest sense, and admittedly is neither precise nor elegant. The concept is perhaps better conveyed and accepted in its

negative definition as a state of "absence of mental illness or distress".

Pharmacological management is frequently an incomplete treatment for these ailments. Even if the 'perfect drug' exists, the very psychological and social processes in these conditions will confound whatever effectiveness claimed by the drug companies or drug trials.

"that by far the most frequently prescribed drug in general practice is the doctor himself"

- Prof Michael Balint

The missing component can be found in the words of the renowned psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Professor Michael Balint, fifty years ago – "that by far the most frequently prescribed drug in general practice is the doctor himself". The skillfulness of the doctor in the doctor-patient interaction has to be an inseparable part of the treatment package.

The College of Family Physicians is thus forming a Special Interest Group on Mental Health. We hope to eventually expand into a larger program to achieve the following:

1. To promote interest among FPs in managing socio-psychological conditions in general practice.
2. To empower FPs with the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to deal effectively with socio-psychological issues in the clinic setting, within the time constraints.
3. To create a conducive environment for practice of bio-psycho-social medicine.

These goals are derived from an approach that encompasses "Person (awareness, knowledge), Skills (practice), and Environment (conducive setting/infrastructure and acceptable care pathways)". Hence, one will know "what to do", "how to do" and "the best place and way to do". The proposed tasks of the interest group will include education, facilitation, development of care network/pathways, and personal development of its members.

The Family Medicine Grand Round on Mental Health on 6th January 2004 will inaugurate the group. Other events planned are skills courses,

workshops, and small discussion groups. The emphasis will be on mental health topics relevant and practical to the FPs. They include counselling and communication skills, psychological techniques and strategies. We welcome comments, contributions, ideas and feedback from you.

WONCA 2004

Plan now to be a part of this historic event by attending the 17th World Conference of Family Doctors (WONCA 2004) in Orlando, Florida; USA October 13-17, 2004. It will be the opportunity to network with your colleagues from around the world while providing an unforgettable experience!

Go to www.wonca2004.org for more information.

College is organizing a delegation for members attending. Please contact Minfen of College Secretariat tel 62230606 to indicate interest.

Elder Care SIG

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The Need

As we are all aware, our nation faces a potential crisis in physician expertise to care for our ageing population. The baby boomers, persons born following World War II between 1946 and 1964, begin to turn 65 in 2011. By 2030, there will be about 800,000 or 19% of the population that will be aged 65 years and above.

The most striking demographic trend in Singapore this century has been the increase, in both relative and absolute terms, of elderly people in the population. Within the elderly population, the greatest expansion is among the very old. As the prevalence of disease and disability increases with age, elderly people place a disproportionate demand on the health care system. This demand on health resources will increase dramatically in the decades ahead. Elderly people also constitute an increasing proportion of the family physician's workload. Overseas data¹ show that family physicians can anticipate in 2020 at least 30% of their outpatients, 60% of their hospitalised patients and 95% of their nursing home and home care residents to be individuals aged 65 and older. (This study was conducted in USA where the population of elderly above 65 is poised to grow to about 20% of their population in the year 2030 which is similar to Singapore) Well-trained family physicians, along with general internists and geriatricians, are essential to provide primary care to the future generations of older adults.

Our Role

It is with the above in mind that College of Family Physicians Singapore has initiated the set-up of a Special Interest Group in Eldercare. The role of such a group will include:

a. Generating interest in the care of the elderly as well as promoting the

awareness of the needs of this subgroup of the population.

b. Increasing the capacity of the family physician to care for the elderly by empowering them with the appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes.

c. Improving the quality of care provided by family physicians as a result of achieving the above two objectives.

Proposed Tasks

It is proposed that the special interest group will bring together a core group of family physicians with interest and passion for the care of the elderly. This group will co-ordinate and organise skills course, seminars and be responsible for a quarterly update of topics relating to the care of the elderly at the Family Medicine Grand Rounds. It is envisaged that with time, the group could also initiate/co-ordinate research and even validate assessment tools for the elderly, especially for use in the local primary care setting.

1st Eldercare SIG meeting will be held on the 16th Jan 2004 (Fri) at 5:15pm at the College Lecture Room, COMB (MOH) Building. All family physicians interested in being part of this SIG are most welcome to attend this meeting as we formalize the roles and activities of this SIG.

Conclusion

Caring for older adults is in harmony with the core values and future directions of family practice. Since its inception, the discipline of family medicine has prided itself in the care of the whole family. If family practice is going to fulfill its promise to care for patients in the context of the family, then the care of the elderly needs also to be emphasized. This, together with the exponential rate of growth of elderly population in the nation, makes it imperative that we make special effort to develop the medical expertise in the care for this subgroup of the population. I would encourage my fellow family physicians to consider the above proposal and participate either by being part of this special interest group or joining in the activities that would soon follow.

Family Medicine Grand Round

First Tuesday of the month

Time: 5:15 pm to 6: 45 pm

Venue: College Lecture Room, COMB (MOH) Building

All Doctors welcomed. Free admission. One Core FM CME point.

Date: Tuesday, 6th January 2004

Theme: "Symptom and Disease Attribution in Family Practice"

Chairman: Professor Kua Ee Heok, Senior Consultant Psychiatrist

Outline: Three short cases would be presented on how mental problems may be attributed by patients to common symptoms like fever, chest pain and heart diseases.

Presenters/Discussants:

Dr Dixie Tan & Dr Tan Yew Seng
Dr Dixie Tan, a cardiologist, underwent a one-year course in the Institute of Psychiatry in London for family therapists. Dr Tan Yew Seng, a family physician has a Graduate Diploma in Psychotherapy NUS and incorporates psychotherapy as part of his practice.

Date: Tuesday, 3rd February 2004

Theme: "Treatment Resistant Depression in the Elderly"

Outline: The concept of treatment resistant depression in the elderly will be discussed with illustration of cases encountered. Various therapeutic measures including the use of different classes of antidepressants as well as other treatment modalities will be also explored.

Presenters/Discussants: Dr Tan Boon Yeow / Dr Francis Ngui

Dr Tan, family physician with a special interest in community geriatrics, recently underwent a year and half clinical geriatric attachment in Australia, as well as completion of a Masters in Medicine (Geriatrics), UNSW. Dr Francis Ngui is a consultant psychiatrist with special interest in geriatric psychiatry. He is also the president of the Singapore Psychiatric Association and medical director of Adam Road Hospital.

Both Dr Tan and Dr Ngui had the privilege of training under Professor Edmond Chiu, a world-renowned psychogeriatrician in Melbourne, Australia.