

General Practice & Research

By Dr Yvette Tan, College Mirror editorial board member and registrar at Hougang Polyclinic. She has an interest in doing research and shares her experience in presenting a paper at WONCA 2003.



Dr Yvette Tan receiving the Best Oral Presentation Award, GP category from Mr Michael Lim, Chairman NHG at the NHG Annual Scientific Conference Oct '03

I attended the WONCA EUROPE 2003 Conference in Slovenia from the 18-21st June. With a gathering of about 1500 family doctors from over 50 countries in Europe and the rest of the world, it was indeed very exciting for a first timer like me. The theme of conference: The future challenges of General Practice/Family Medicine, was a timely one, considering that health care reform is gaining momentum in many countries throughout Europe. The scientific program was packed, with fourteen parallel sessions running at any one time. It had particular emphasis on education, research and quality assurance, health promotion and disease prevention as well as rural family medicine, communication with

patients, new technologies, quality and humour in medicine.

From Singapore, we contributed 2 oral and 1 poster presentations. Dr Hong Ching Ye, from COFM(NUS), one of our collaborators for the NHGP URTI study, presented on 'A comparison of clinical presentation in viral and bacterial upper respiratory tract infection.'; I presented on "Patient centredness: What determines the doctors' clinical behaviour?" and Dr Chong Phui Nah had a poster presentation on 'Antibiotic prescribing in URTI'. I attended several interesting workshops, 'learning and teaching the patient centred clinical method', 'The calming reflex: an effective new way to treat colic and crying in early infancy' and 'Drawing family circles - quick and easy tool in family medicine'.

The enthusiasm in sharing and learning was shared by both presenters and participants; and there was plenty of sharing of experiences and card exchanging!

Some of them still thought that Singapore was part of China; and were very interested in knowing how we were coping with patient-centred communication here! Slovenia is picturesque and the people very hospitable. We had a welcome reception by the Mayoress of Slovenia in a castle on a hill. It was quite a sight to behold!

This WONCA experience have been very positive for me; learnt a lot of new stuff, got inspired to do more for family medicine and made some new friends. I would certainly recommend this for anyone who is interested in developing the discipline of family medicine both internationally and within Singapore. It was certainly a great opportunity for developing new contacts and networking; not to mention a respite from the humdrum of work! For all those persevering with your research projects, press on! The WONCA experience may be something you don't want to miss!

Daily, most of us do some form of research or other - just observe yourself in the supermarket or when you embark on big purchases such as a house or car. The instinct is to find out as much about the quality of our potential purchase and to compare this with alternative buys. This is market research; and we do it all the time and only to lesser or greater magnitude depending on our background knowledge and how significant the purchase.

Practice & Research

In our clinical practice, we realize time is our most important resource in the consultations. We want to do things and say things that will have the most positive impact on the patient with regards to his presenting problem i.e. activities that will give us the highest yield for our time and effort. Similarly, the patient would appreciate that investigations are cost-effective and interventions of greatest benefit.

Where do we find such information on such best practices? Where can we find objective information on what actually works and what does not? And if some intervention works, how good is this compared to placebo, or to conventional management?

Evidence based medicine (EBM) rose as a response to this clinical dilemma. For the sceptics of EBM, the question remains on the alternative left. Anecdotal based medicine? Experience - based medicine? Expert-based medicine? Drug representative-based medicine? One may have to admit that the other basis of influence on our clinical practice can be subjective.

So why do research?

If one tries to practise EBM; and start looking up the research literature on the particular aspects of care, one would find that the evidence is lacking, or unsatisfactory since it does not fit our contextual

requirements. How, then can one find a satisfactory solution to this? Well, if the clinical question appears to be significant, in terms of the impact on patient, health professional or system; then one may choose to embark to spend time and energy on a research project to answer the clinical question. In so doing, he has contributed to the body of knowledge that will help others improve the quality of care to the patients.

So does primary care need to do research?

Well, we take a step back and ask if the clinical challenges faced by us are similar to that faced by our specialist colleagues. As we face situations unique to primary care, it would be unreasonable to think that our specialist colleagues will be able to supply us with the answers. So once we see this and start seeking answers, more of us will naturally jump on the bandwagon of research!