

Graduate Diplomas as life-long, inter-disciplinary adult education

This article is based on the valedictory speech given by A/Prof Cheong Pak Yean at the Graduate Diploma presentation ceremony organised by the Division of Postgraduate Medical Studies (DPGMS) of the National University of Singapore on 17th December 2003. Diplomas for the Graduate Diploma in Family Medicine as well as that of Ultrasonography, Psychotherapy, Geriatrics and FP Dermatology were presented to successful graduands by Prof Lee Eng Hin, DPGMS, NUS.

1. Life-long Education

"If the license to practise meant the completion of education, how sad it would be for the young practitioner, how distressing for his patients." Sir William Osler

By law, all that is needed to practise medicine in Singapore is to be registered with the Singapore Medical Council (SMC). In addition, if a doctor puts himself to be a medical specialist, he has to be registered in the Specialist Medical Register as well. However, generalists or specialists, medical education should be a continuing process. There are gaps of knowledge and skills to be filled as well as new ones to acquire. Even basic clinical skills have to be revisited. A recent study of basic auscultation skills of heart sounds by doctors revealed that competency rapidly deteriorated after 8 years post-MBBS irrespective of the clinical postings done by these doctors. (see page 11)

The study reinforced the notion that while knowledge may be kept current with ad-hoc continuing medical education (CME), cognitive and psychomotor skills are better maintained with structured and verified training such as that afforded by the graduate diplomas programmes. A barrier to greater enrolment in diploma programmes must be the psychological trauma inflicted on some by professional medical examinations be it the MBBS examinations and even more so post-graduate examinations leading to membership and Masters degrees. However, without both formative and summative assessment of learning, there would not be the discipline to spend enough time in clinical apprenticeship and scholarship nor the confidence acquired with successful completion.

2. Inter-disciplinary Education

"There are, in truth, no specialties in medicine, since to know fully many of the

most important diseases a man must be familiar with their manifestations in many organs." Sir William Osler

Each of us practises in an area of healthcare, experts in our own field and working as a team with others in caring for our patients. Specialisation of care that benefits some patients can however disenfranchise other patients because of fragmented and poorly co-ordinated care. Graduate diplomas provide the



Prof Lee Eng Hin, Director, DPGMS, National University of Singapore presenting the Diploma in FP Dermatology to A/Prof Cheong Pak Yean

opportunity for doctors to acquire better skills so that care can be better integrated. For example, psychiatrists should be better trained to practice psychotherapy, family physicians in geriatrics.

The benefits of such interdisciplinary education are magnified when doctors so trained at the interfaces are accepted in the worlds of more than one discipline. As a concrete example, Special Interest Groups in Mental Health and Elder Care are now set up in the College of Family Physicians to further enhance such care. These groups are led by family physicians that have completed their Diplomas in psychotherapy and geriatric programmes respectively and equipped not just with better skills but closer professional ties with their specialists colleagues. (See page 16 & 17)

3. Adult education

"The successful teacher is no longer on a

height, pumping knowledge at high pressure into passive receptacles...he is a senior student anxious to help his juniors" Sir William Osler

Unlike undergraduate programmes, teachers and students in the diploma programmes travel the same learning journey together. I bear personal testimony to this being the Director of the Graduate Diploma in Family Medicine (GDFM) programme since 2000 as well as a student enrolled in the Dermatology Diploma programme in 2002. In the best tradition of the medical profession, there is this great commitment of our teachers in Singapore to teach freely just as there is the zeal of our doctors as students to learn humbly. And preparing for examinations is equally arduous for both teachers and students.

The late Professor Chan Heng Leong who left us in the middle of 2003 epitomised this tradition of teaching. Prof. Chan was instrumental in starting the dermatology diploma and chairing the committee that oversaw the programme. Few of us attending the Diploma in Dermatology in 2002 knew that he was stricken with illness as he so enthusiastically continued to give lectures, provided clinical tutorials and conduct the clinical dermatology examination despite the pain and debilitation he suffered.

I like to conclude this valedictory address on a personal note, not to those present here who have already taken the step but to other colleagues. I have publicly advocated as a teacher that structured training such as that leading to graduate medical diplomas is the preferred CME. Now that I have walked my talk as a student almost 30 years after MBBS, I hope that you would too.

Reference:

Quotations from "Sir William Osler: Aphorisms from His Bedside Teachings and Writings" Collected by Robert Bennett Bean, M.D. (1874-1944) Edited by William Bennett Bean, M.D. Charles C. Thomas, Publisher, Springfield, Illinois, 1968

For those who are interested in Graduate Diploma Family Medicine(GDFM), please contact college at 6 2230606 or email : contact@cfps.org.sg.

For other diplomas, please contact NUS at 68743353 or email : dgms@nus.edu.sg