

Practical Solutions ?

Wonca Europe, its Networks and Organizations

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INTRODUCTION

Europe is characterised by diversity in all areas of society. One of the areas of diversity is the way health care is delivered, but some principles are universal. Family medicine has at least since Alma Ata been recognised as the key element of a good health care system. This importance is stressed by many declarations, policy papers and research articles.

Over the years, evidence of importance of family medicine has accumulated and there is more than enough evidence from research that show that the strength of a country's primary care system is associated with improved population health outcomes, that health systems with a strong primary care orientation tend to be more equitable and accessible and that using primary care physicians reduces costs and increases patient satisfaction with no adverse effects on patient outcomes. In the beginning of the 21st century, family medicine was well established in all health care systems in Europe. In most countries in the former Soviet block it has been accepted as the basis for their new health care systems.

The question remains whether family medicine has been able to meet these challenges put forward by policymakers and whether it was provided with sufficient resources to meet them.

WONCA

Helping in achieving a better position of the discipline in Europe is an important challenge for international organisations of family medicine, like Wonca Europe. The organisation was established in 1995 and represents the European region within Wonca world, the global organisation of family doctors.

It is an international organisation of colleges and networks organisations and represents the strongest region within Wonca world. Currently, Wonca Europe has 39 member colleges from... countries with a wide diversity of problems that need to be addressed. While some colleges are well established and well organised, the others still struggle in order to be properly recognised within the scientific and professional community.

The other constitutive body of Wonca Europe are its three network organisations. EQUIP, the European network for quality in general practice is concerned with the quality of care, delivered by general practice. EGPRN, the research network, is organising regular meetings of researchers in family medicine and is conducting courses on research training for general practitioners. EURACT, the educational network of Wonca Europe, is running courses for teachers in family medicine and has been very active in developing many policy papers, the most prominent are probably the European definition of general practice and the teaching agenda for general practice. Each of the network organisations meets twice a year. One representative of each of the networks is a member of the Wonca Europe executive committee.

Over the time, other networks have also been established. The most prominent are EUROPREV, which is the network organisation for prevention and health promotion, and EURIPA, the network of rural doctors. Both of them receive regular support for their activities through the organisation. Wonca Europe has recently been strengthened by the Vasco da Gama movement of young doctors. The movement was established during the Wonca Europe conference in Amsterdam in 2004 and has proven to be a very important component of Wonca Europe.

There are also groups with an interest in specific areas of medicine: there are special interest groups in respiratory diseases, in cardiovascular diseases, in occupational medicine. Their role to the organisation is very important, because they often serve as a source of expertise in specific clinical fields and in communication with organisations of clinical specialists on common projects.

The role of Wonca Europe is to work internationally by helping the exchange of knowledge, by networking with other organisations and to serve as advocates of the discipline internationally. The usual strategies include organising annual conferences, publishing a journal, producing statements and lobbying for policy changes at international level. These strategies have had some success in the past: the European Journal of General Practice has received a status of a journal, indexed in Medline, the European definition of general practice has been translated in most European languages and is often used in discussions with policymakers and lay people as a tool of explaining the importance of family medicine. The EURACT teaching agenda is a template that can be used for the development of curricula according to the new definition. The Wonca Europe meetings are increasing in attendance of delegates and are becoming a real meeting place of family medicine experts.

CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

Nevertheless, there are many challenges that need to be achieved. Europe has experienced a lot of changes in the last 30 years. We have proved to the public that family medicine has an important impact on health of populations. This important fact, supported by ample research evidence, means that we must take a proactive and not a defensive role. Family doctors are now increasingly being involved in the academic environment and are influencing the development of their health care systems through their professional organizations. As individuals they have been able to change in order to meet these new challenges.

Countries are constantly changing their health care systems, always claiming to be raising the importance of primary health care, but the practices are not always in line with their claims and the successes are variable. Some countries have shown great improvement in the development of the discipline over the last

two decades. In order for the organisation to become recognised as a true key player, a lot of work still needs to be done on its image, cooperation with the public and other professionals.

In the future, Wonca Europe is aiming at achieving its goal of increasing its membership so that every European country would be included in the organisation. Better cooperation with other professional organisations is necessary in areas of common interest.

Family medicine is able to take over the responsibilities of a well established discipline, which is characterized by partnership between the academy and practice. Theory has been useful in explaining why family medicine is unique, but future research should take into account the relevance of development projects in practice. New steps need to be taken, the steps that would prove our value to the public. They can be made only in partnership between the professional organizations and academic bodies.