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Trainees Corner

WONCA Europe 2009: reflections and personal highlights

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Why this matters to us

In April 2009 we launched the RCGP Junior International Committee, the UK representative body to the Vasco da Gama Movement. Since then we have worked hard to establish a network of UK trainees and junior GPs with an interest in international primary care, as well as promote international exchange

and research. This year's WONCA Europe conference was a great success for the group with the presence of a strong UK contingent. We hope to repeat this success next year and inspire an even greater number of trainees and junior GPs to take part in international conferences and clinical exchange.

Introduction

This year the London Deanery awarded travel bursaries for five trainees to attend the WONCA Europe Conference in Basel. The aim was to provide us with an extraordinary educational experience and consolidate the establishment of the RCGP Junior International Committee (JIC: junior-rcgp-international-committee@googlegroups.com; www.jintc.org.) WONCA is the World Organisation of National Colleges, Academies and Academic Associations of General Practitioners/Family Physicians (www.globalfamilydoctor.com). The conference theme was the Fascination of Complexity.

Trainees often find complexity in general practice daunting, however in Basel we saw complexity celebrated in all its majesty. Speakers drew inspiration from art and nanomedicine whilst the halls were filled with an assortment of global primary care research. What was on show was the infinite scope and creativity of general practice. We returned from the conference with new ideas, new friends and an overflowing enthusiasm for international primary care. Here are our highlights.



Anticipation filled the auditorium as the stately tones of a surrealistic carnival band announced the opening of the 15th WONCA Europe Conference.



Dr Nick Kim in Iona Heath's Disease Mongering workshop

Vasco da Gama Movement preconference

This year a record breaking number of UK participants attended the Vasco da Gama Movement (VdGM; www.vdgm.eu) preconference, alongside peers from 19 different countries. Numerous issues raised passionate debate such as the image of the GP across Europe, whether 'carrots or sticks' should be used in training, and the recognition, or lack of it, of general practice as a specialty. The VdGM annual Council meeting also ran in parallel, with each country's council representative discussing their vision for the coming years. New members were elected to the VdGM Executive Board, including Luisa Pettigrew from the UK.

Disease mongering

Iona Heath ran an extremely popular workshop which explored the phenomenon of 'Disease Mongering'. GPs from Europe and across the world demonstrated their creative genius by coming up with impacting marketing campaigns for prevalent, yet mundane complaints. By the end of the session almost everyone in the room had a serious affliction, which could only be cured with imaginatively named pills and potions concocted by the same people who had created the illness! The exercise caused much hilarity. However it made one reflect on the ease with which this could be done and the severity of the potential implications for those without medical training. Sound familiar?

Setting standards in primary care education

A workshop organised by the WONCA Education Working Party, entitled Global Standards for Family Medicine Education and Training set out to discuss the standards for GP training. This reflected the fact that countries have differing resource availability and are at different stages of establishing primary care medicine. It was interesting to discover that countries such as Russia and Switzerland until recently did not have a formal GP training scheme. There was plenty of lively debate and by the end a broad consensus was achieved; although arguments persisted over whether these standards would be the minimum or the ideal countries should aspire to.

On the whole we felt that the UK should be proud of its healthcare model. Not only does primary care training in the UK already meet WONCA standards, but the introduction of the nMRCGP, extended training schemes and revalidation ensures high standards continue to be maintained. The discussion helped UK trainees see these assessment tools as markers of excellence and professional standards, rather than an inconvenient tick box exercise.

Humanities and medicine

Of particular interest were various workshops which explored using humanities to aid lateral thinking and appreciation of the holistic nature of family medicine. Krzysztof Penderecki's 'Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima', a musical composition for 52 string instruments, hushed the room to silence as we listened in absolute horror to eight minutes of screeching, ringing

and silence – possibly the scariest piece of music ever written! It evoked strong reactions across the room, memories of 9/11 and acts of terrorism. It has been described as ‘one of the most moving pieces of music’ that can heighten understanding of pain and suffering. We were shown the painting ‘The Doctor’ (Luke Fildes, 1891). This sparked reflections of the various roles of a doctor and the perennial emotions of grief and suffering across all eras, despite advances of modern medicine.

Mountain Rescue workshop

The conference provided new and inspiring perspectives on international general practice. Especially when we found ourselves dangling halfway up a rope ladder, carrying emergency supplies, trying to rescue two ‘mountaineers’ from the makeshift ‘mountain’ in the Congress Centre. The Mountain Rescue workshop was about working efficiently and safely in a team by communicating, planning and coordinating, and by trusting each other. All essential skills needed in everyday general practice, and it was fun to practise them in this fittingly Swiss workshop.



Dr Duveken Voors learning about the importance of teamwork climbing the ‘virtual’ Swiss Alps.

Swiss life

A few delegates were invited to visit local Swiss practices. One local GP ran her surgery with her husband. It was surprising to hear that she trained as a hospital physician and never had any formal GP training. Even more surprising was the discovery of a laboratory and X-ray machine in their small practice,



Basel, The Rhine

which served a practice population of only 1200 patients. It was intriguing to see how this was feasible and to learn about the funding, organisation, and health beliefs of the Swiss.

Many UK delegates also had the opportunity to live with a Swiss doctor. Reem Hasan and Ha-Neul Seo from the UK were warmly welcomed into a Swiss family home in a beautiful 17th century house in the centre of the old town. Living with local doctors offered a unique opportunity to learn about health-care and training in Switzerland. It was fascinating learning about the system and its development from experienced local doctors. Perhaps one of the most memorable experiences was seeing Basel itself through the eyes of a true local; the secret places and the history not written about in guidebooks.

The international flavour of the conference, thought provoking workshops and plenaries, alongside the opportunity to savour a real taste of Swiss life from the perspective of a local doctor made the whole event truly unique! Next year WONCA Europe will take place in Malaga, Spain and based on WONCA Europe 2009 we would thoroughly recommend the experience!

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