

# Our Medical School *Quo Vadis?*

The Medical School of the University of Malta is truly an institution with a unique historical background and mission, as has been shown time and again since its foundation in 1676, when the School of Medicine was referred to as the School of Anatomy and Surgery. Over subsequent centuries, it grew and evolved to meet the changing needs of a population often undergoing rapid social change and occasionally beleaguered by wars. The Medical School responded well to the fresh challenges brought by the emergence of certain medical problems and against a background initially of colonialism and subsequently independence.

The Medical School quickly established a reputation for excellence promulgated far and wide by the scholarship and quality of medicine practiced by its graduates. The latter established themselves as outstanding physicians in royal courts in Europe and subsequently in some of the foremost establishments and hospitals throughout Europe and indeed North America and Australia. It is difficult to single out one illustrious graduate among so many but for instance, around two hundred years ago, one particular graduate, Joseph Barth (1746-1818), was described as 'a man of great merit and undoubtedly the first among ophthalmologists'.

The challenges faced by this kernel of academia continue to multiply. The vast increase in medical knowledge and the need to prepare graduates to face new issues related to the practice of medicine have over the years necessitated re-assessment of the teaching process and the curriculum. A certain degree of 'targeted functionality' has also been made mandatory by the increasing strain on healthcare resources and finances. Accession to the European Union, whilst welcomed as a means of opening up borders across nations, has resulted in the need to take on further responsibilities within the setting of a pan-European medical education system and network. New targets have to be met, the process of harmonization needs to be attended to, as does the need to interface at both undergraduate and postgraduate level with other medical schools and institutions. One does not here refer solely to enabling our students to successfully complete diploma and degree courses but also the need to maintain continuing professional development and to establish research programmes which are a necessary part of the contribution that a University Hospital and a Medical School can make to the professional and lay community, as well as to the economic development of our country.

The Faculty of Medicine and Surgery has continued to rise to the occasion but the Medical School now finds itself at a crossroads. Taking the wrong turning at this point could destroy what has withstood the onslaught of wars, industrial disputes and political upheaval.

There is currently a move to embed the Medical School both physically and administratively within the framework of the new hospital, Mater Dei. A number of medical schools in other countries have been designed on this model but the model proposed here is lacking in planning, foresight and vision.

First and foremost, the physical space within which it is proposed to house the Medical School does not even accommodate the current school, let alone allow room for expansion with the aim of improving service provision, teaching and research, widely recognized as being the foundation stones upon which a teaching hospital and medical school should be modeled in order to be described as a centre of excellence.

The housing envisaged at present suggests that it would not even be possible to run certain hands-on courses which require tightly co-ordinated, intensive small group teaching such as clinical skills and the cardiopulmonary resuscitation course which are now mandatory for both final year medical students and senior house officer training. The international trend to move from didactic teaching to practical orientation is a laudable one but will be severely hampered locally given the fact that the availability of lecture halls, auditoria, and tutorial rooms will be administratively within the remit of the hospital service providers to apportion as they see fit between the hospital's administrative services, the Faculties of Medicine and Dentistry and the Institute of Healthcare. It is worth noting that the latter three together currently have access to more space in their present site locations, and still encounter problems with timetabling and scheduling regular teaching sessions, let alone additional lectures, courses or re-scheduling! Furthermore, the absence of 'Boardroom' facilities for all four institutions is also a matter of concern. Faculty Board meetings as well as congress of the many committees and subcommittees (both statutory and advisory) promise to be a further logistical problem.

The mandate to teach that the Medical School has, goes beyond the imparting of knowledge in the basic and clinical sciences. Students need to be encouraged to undertake research and to acquire thought processes trained in the scientific method. The impetus to embark upon research was very much

in evidence even among junior medical students at the recent successful research seminar organized in February of this year by this Journal. The inadequacy and almost complete absence of areas allocated for research work at the proposed relocation site provides sobering testimony to the lack of competence, foresight and vision of the administrators and politicians involved in planning. A teaching hospital that is a centre of excellence goes beyond bricks, mortar and equipment. An effective patient-oriented service, education at every level, and to all healthcare professionals, and a well-funded research programme are the hallmarks of all teaching hospitals that are centers of excellence. If the new hospital is to function as a university teaching hospital both at undergraduate and postgraduate level, then the very architecture, infrastructure,

management and the day-to-day administration must of necessity reflect this commitment to service, teaching and research. The educators' advice in all three respects seems to have been ignored and it is worthy of note that they have not been consulted regarding the new proposal but rather have been presented with a *fait accompli*.

The financial constraints and political controversy that face this country and its administration are appreciated. However, the appropriate and apportionate allocation of funds to the provision of premises that not only befit a modern Medical School and teaching hospital with a proud tradition, but also make it functional, accessible, effective and flexible is crucial to the success of Mater Dei as a center of excellence in teaching and health service provision.

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Editor