

Silver service - 25 years of activities by the Malta College of Family Doctors (1990-2015)

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INTRODUCTION

The Malta College of Family Doctors is an autonomous academic institution that was formally set up in 1990 with the object to encourage, foster and maintain the highest possible standards in family medicine in Malta, and to sustain and improve the professional qualifications of members of the medical profession in Malta who are engaged in family medicine.

ORIGIN & DEVELOPMENT

The need for advancement of family medicine in Malta had been felt for a long time, but any such activities were not possible before the end of the ten-year medical dispute in August 1987. One exception was a 9-month intensive course for family physicians, conducted in 1987-88 by the late Prof. Douglas Johnson of the University of Toronto under the auspices of the University of Malta. Preparations for such course had been made by the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery prior to August 1987. In March 1988, three family doctors, namely Dr Denis Soler, Dr Wilfred Galea and Dr Ray Busuttill, were appointed to a General Practice Sub-Committee of the Postgraduate Medical Committee (PMC) of the University of Malta's Faculty of Medicine & Surgery. Their remit was to devise a development plan for family medicine in Malta.

In their report presented to the PMC in November 1988, four areas were outlined for future development:

- (1) The development of a Department of Family Medicine within the Faculty of Medicine;
- (2) The establishment of a programme of continuing medical education for family doctors;
- (3) The development of a vocational training programme in family medicine;
- (4) The setting up of a Malta College of Family Doctors.

As a result of intensive lobbying by these three doctors, Dr Alistair Donald and Dr Edwin Martin, chairman and

member of the International Committee of the Royal College of General Practitioners, were invited to Malta in November 1989 to assess the situation and offer their advice. These five gentlemen worked hard together to produce a charter for a proposed Malta College of Family Doctors, and the formation of the College in fact was formally announced by Dr Soler in the presence of Dr Donald and Dr Martin during a Postgraduate Medical Committee Meeting in November 1989.

A provisional Committee was set up to draw up a College Statute, and both were formally endorsed during the College's first general meeting on the 4th April 1990, with Dr Denis Soler as College President, Dr Wilfred Galea as Vice-President and Dr Ray Busuttill as Honorary Secretary. Picture 1 shows members of the College Council and guests in 1994.

PLANS & POLICIES

The MCFD made an impact on the proposed reforms in primary health care services in Malta in the early 1990s, before these were eventually shelved for political reasons. It had earned itself representation on the Family Doctor Scheme Council, which had been envisaged as the body to run the general practitioner service. The College's role was to be not only an advisory one, but it would have been responsible for the organisation of the compulsory refresher course for doctors joining the scheme. Its functions would have included also the evaluation of the suitability of practice premises, the accreditation of doctors for the receipt of the CME allowance, and the assessment of practices for the receipt of the good practice allowance.

After recommending a standard Data Set for Computerised Medical Records in 1996, the College started planning for the development of a full Computerised Medical Records System for family

doctors. Its aim was to facilitate good quality continuing care, health screening through recall systems, the keeping and exchange of statistics, and the performance of research and audit. In 1998 the College signed an agreement with the Transition Project from the University of Amsterdam to use the Computerised Medical Records System - TRANSHIS, based on ICPC – the International Classification for Primary Care, and developed for family doctors by Prof. Henk Lamberts and Dr Inge Okkes (Picture 2). Transhis was launched during 2 workshops held in February 2000, with 17 doctors signifying their readiness to use the programme under the coordination of Dr Jean Karl Soler. By the end of 2003, Maltese users accumulated 3 full years of data on the system.

The MCFD has always pushed for the creation of a culture for research in family medicine, as it believes that it is through research that academic credibility and status can be developed further. In fact the College approved a Research Policy and Planning Document in 1997 to promote research in Family Medicine in an organised way, to improve the status of the specialty, and enhance:

- the academic development and career prospects of family doctors,
- knowledge and information on family practice, enabling plans for its future, and
- the health and well being of the population.

The College developed a Strategy for the Future of the Malta College of Family Doctors and of Family Medicine in Malta in 1998-99. The most important and urgent targets were identified as the accessing of members, a policy document, patient initiatives, the definition of standards, a patient charter, and a PR exercise. In fact, a Patient Charter, entitled 'You and Your Doctor', was presented to the College Council in March 1998. A Family Doctor Directory, initially drawn up in 1994, was revised and updated during 1998, when it consisted of 269 full-time and 34 part-time family doctors. Such a directory was intended as just an interim step towards the College's ultimate aim of establishing a proper Specialist Register of family doctors who have undergone Specialist Training in Family Medicine.

Although a Policy Document entitled 'The College - History and Future Development' was prepared for the College by (then) Honorary Secretary Dr Ray Busuttil in March 1993, this unfortunately was never published. Then, in line with the declared intention of the World Health Organisation to define a charter for General Practice/Family Medicine in Europe, a Policy Document on Family Medicine in Malta was drawn up

and approved by the College in 1998. Its objective was to sensitise the public, the Government and University to the importance of family medicine, and to upgrade the status of the family doctor as a specialist in his/her own right. The publication of this policy document was intended to serve as a springboard for the launch of a Specialist Training Course in Family Medicine, which however did not materialise at that stage. The International Committee of the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP), the European General Practice Research Network (EGPRN) and the Royal Society of Medicine, amongst others, had confirmed their willingness to help in its implementation. What was lacking to bring it to fruition was the necessary funding, together with the support of the University, the Department of Health and the Government.

In 1998 the MCFD was invited by the Minister of Health to start discussions, together with the Department of Primary Health Care and the Medical Association of Malta, for the reorganisation of Primary Health Care. In 1999, the College President gave the College Council an overview of the ensuing document, entitled Reforms of the Primary Health Care Services. Three systems were to be proposed to the cabinet for a definite commitment by the government before one was developed. However the proposed reforms were turned down, reportedly due to financial reasons.

In 2001, the College Council agreed to the following strategic recommendations for the further development of the College:

- Marketing of the College through patient handouts, newspaper articles and multimedia presentations;
- Sub-committees to be set up regarding group practices, doctor-patient registration cards, and membership by examination;
- The introduction of membership/certificate courses;
- The seeking of strategic partner/s.

Other topics proposed included GP cooperatives, practice certification, a College archive, the Journal on CD, and small group meetings.

In 2001, the College Council agreed to develop a two-year course leading to membership by examination (MMCFD). However, in 2003, the Council noted that other countries around the world are negotiating with the RCGP for certain concessions to allow local trainee GPs to do the highly reputable MRCGP International.

Council thus agreed that the way forward for Malta should be for the MCFD to provide assistance (through a Teachers' Group) for local candidates to prepare for the MRCGP[INT], rather than to reinvent the wheel by developing an expensive local course and examination.

CPD PROGRAMME AND JOURNAL

There being no formal training in family medicine in Malta, the College launched a Continuing Professional Development Programme in September 1990, originally in the form of a three-evening meeting, with educational events to this day being held in each term of the academic year - Autumn, Winter and Spring - under the direction of a team currently led by Dr Philip Sciortino. Other ad-hoc meetings are also organised (Picture 3). A system of accreditation of CME activities was initiated in 2000, with continuing membership of the College depending on the accumulation of sufficient credit units within this scheme.

The credibility and status earned by the College in the first three years of its existence resulted in the Postgraduate Medical Committee of the University's Faculty of Medicine formally passing on to the College in 1993 the organisation of all postgraduate educational activities for family doctors. For a time, the College was also asked to act as coordinator of the whole CME calendar for the PMC.

In 2001, a Strategy for the College's CPD Programme was presented to the College Council, consisting of the following objectives:

- The presentation be improved as regards venue, publicity and refreshments;
- The academic content be improved according to the needs ascertained through research;
- The format of teaching be practice-based and informal, taking place in small groups;
- The topics be not always clinically based, but should also include other topics like academic family practice and practice management.

Highlights of early academic activities organised by the College include:

- 5-day Family Doctor Training Seminar on Community Psychiatry co-organised in May 1994;
- 3-day Joint Seminar on Paediatrics and Obstetrics & Gynaecology co-organised in November 1996;
- 6th Mediterranean Medical Congress & 2nd Mediterranean Summer School of the Mediterranean Medical Society, organised in Malta by the College on 5-10 September 2000;

- Brief Intervention Training Workshop on Smoking Cessation in General Practice co-organised with the Irish College of General Practitioners on 18 October 2003 (Picture 4).

In September 1990, the first issue of '*It-Tabib tal-Familja*', the Journal of the Malta College of Family Doctors, was issued a humble four-page newsletter with Dr Godfrey Farrugia as editor (Picture 5). Dr Farrugia was replaced as editor by Dr Jean Karl Soler in 1993, with the newsletter being converted to a colour journal in 1995 and upgraded academically in 2000 with the appointment of three international peer reviewers, an international scientific advisory board to recruit papers from the Mediterranean region, and a change in name to '*The Family Physician - It-Tabib tal-Familja*'. In 2005, Dr Noel Caruana was appointed the new editor, and the journal was renamed '*The Maltese Family Doctor*'. In 2012, the College Council relaunched the journal under the name of the '*Journal of the Malta College of Family Doctors (JMCFD)*' which is being issued three times a year with Prof. Pierre Mallia as Editor (Picture 6).

The JMCFD is available online together with other resources useful for College members on the MCFD website at www.mcfcd.org.mt/jmcfcd. An MCFD website had been launched in February 1996 through the initiative of Dr Wilfred Galea, one of the College founders, courtesy of Grazio Falzon's 'Malta Virtuali' in the USA. In October 1996, the site exchanged its host for TheSynapse Network here in Malta, and subsequently was transferred to the current URL www.mcfcd.org.mt by Dr Renzo De Gabriele. The website was later reconstructed by Dr Kenneth Vassallo and is currently maintained by webmaster Jan Willem van Avendonk.

INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

The Malta College of Family Doctors has maintained the excellent relationship it has had with the Royal College of General Practitioners since its inception. A certificate dated 4 September 1990 presented to the Malta College by the RCGP through Dr Edwin Martin (the RCGP's Malta Fellow during 1990-3) gives evidence to this (Picture 7). This certificate states that the RCGP '*regards the Malta College as a sister body that will set the standards of education in family medicine in Malta and as the body which will, where appropriate, give accreditation to doctors undertaking approved training for family medicine*'. Besides a Workshop on Counselling in Family Practice in 1995 (Picture 8), the RCGP's help resulted in a 5-day Teachers' Course in Family Medicine run with the Bedfordshire &

Hertfordshire Faculty in 1993 (Picture 9), the sponsorship of College representative Dr Philip Sciortino in an International Course for Teachers of General Practice in 1997-98 (Picture 10), and the following other teachers' courses:

- 2002-3: 9-day Teachers' Course held in collaboration with RCGP (Picture 11);
- 2004: 10-day RCGP-MCFD Teachers' Course (Picture 12);
- 2006: 5-day MCFD-RCGP Teachers' Course Module on 'Mentoring & Appraisal' (Picture 13);
- 2006: MCFD-RCGP Assessment Workshop.

These were the first steps in preparation for the local introduction of specialist training in family medicine.

Over the years the College developed affiliations and links with other important organisations:

- the Canadian College of Family Physicians, most especially with the late Professor Douglas Johnson who had given his unstinting help and support in all of the College's major projects;
- the Irish College of General Practitioners, through the provision of distance learning programmes and the organisation in Malta of a Brief Intervention Training Workshop on Smoking Cessation in General Practice during 2003;
- the World Organisation of Family Doctors – WONCA and the European Society of General Practice/Family Medicine - WONCA Europe with its various network organisations: the European Association for Quality in General Practice/Family Medicine - EQuIP, the European General Practice Research Network – EGPRN, the European Academy of Teachers in General Practice/Family Medicine – EURACT, and the European Network for Prevention and Health Promotion in General Practice/Family Medicine – EUROPREV.

The College's membership of the World Organisation of Family Doctors (WONCA) was boosted in 1996 when two Council members, Dr Wilfred Galea and Dr Jean Karl Soler, were appointed to the WONCA Working Party on Informatics. Moreover, in 1998 Dr Soler was appointed to the WONCA International Classification Committee. In 1995 the MCFD became a founder member of WONCA Europe and automatically a member of the WONCA Europe Council, and the College was also honoured by the WONCA Europe in 1997 when two Council members (Dr Denis Soler and Dr Mario R Sammut) were invited to chair sessions in its Prague Conference that year (Picture 14).

While the MCFD obtained affiliation with EQuIP in 1994 with whom it was ably represented by Dr Anthony P Azzopardi, local ties are especially strong with the other three WONCA Europe network organisations - EGPRN, EURACT and EUROPREV. No less than three workshops of EGPRN have taken place in Malta in 1996 (Picture 15), 2004 and 2013, with EGPRN research-methods courses also held in Malta in 1999 (Picture 16) and 2004. Former MCFD Council Members Dr Anthony Mifsud and Dr Jean Karl Soler were instrumental in the organisation of these activities in the role of Malta's national representative to EGPRN, with Dr Soler also being elected Chairman of EGPRN in 2013.

In 2008, EURACT held its Spring Council Meeting in Malta in 2008 (Picture 17) and also played a role in the organisation in Malta of courses and a workshop as follows:

- 2007: 5-day MCFD-EURACT-RCGP Teachers' Course (Picture 18);
- 2008: EURACT-MCFD International Workshop on Lifelong Learning in Family Practice (Picture 19);
- 2009: 5-day MCFD-EURACT Teachers' Course.

In his role as Malta's national representative to EURACT since 2004, former MCFD Honorary Secretary Dr Mario R Sammut facilitated the participation of local family doctors in various EURACT teachers' and assessment courses abroad, and in 2013 he was elected as Honorary Secretary of EURACT.

Dr Mario R Sammut also spent 14 years (1999-2013) as a member of the Coordinating Team of EUROPREV, and on behalf of the MCFD was the local coordinator of the EUROPREV survey on the attitudes and knowledge of GPs in prevention and health promotion held in 2000 and of the EUROPREVIEW Patient Study to elucidate the beliefs and attitudes of patients regarding preventive services and lifestyle during 2008-9.

UNDERGRADUATE AND POSTGRADUATE TEACHING IN FAMILY MEDICINE

The College over the years had repeatedly proposed to the relevant authorities the establishment of a separate Department of Family Medicine within the University Faculty of Medicine & Surgery. This would provide instruction in family medicine for undergraduate medical students, and was also envisaged to be involved, in liaison with the College, in the setting up and running of Postgraduate Vocational Training in Family Medicine.

Through such pressure from the College, the post of part-time lecturer in general practice within the Department of Public Health in the Faculty of Medicine was instituted on 1st January 1991 with the appointment of Dr Ray Busuttill.

After further lobbying by the MCFD, the Dean of the University Faculty of Medicine & Surgery, Prof. Mark Brincat, announced plans for the set up of a Department of Family Medicine during a meeting with a College delegation on the 3rd February 1999. Dr Denis Soler, as President of the College, was invited to chair an ad-hoc Advisory Committee on Family Medicine, whose main aim was to prepare an undergraduate and postgraduate programme for the new Department of Family Medicine. The Department was formally set up in April 2001 with the appointment of 7 lecturers (all College members), and Dr Denis Soler as Head of Department.

After his retirement in 2013, Dr Soler was replaced by Dr Philip Sciortino as Head and the department presently consists of 8 part-time lecturers who provide an undergraduate teaching programme of lectures, tutorials (face-to-face and electronic) and community placements for medical students in their 4th year. The Department of Family Medicine also runs a postgraduate MSc in Family Medicine, with the first cohort of candidates graduating in 2009.

Since 2001, MCFD members have participated through distance-learning in Diplomas in Therapeutics, Prevention and Women's Health, and a Certificate in Diabetes all held by the Irish College of General Practitioners (Picture 20). Then, during 2004-7, MCFD Council Member Dr Jean Karl Soler facilitated the participation of College members in the University of Ulster's distance-learning Diploma/MSc in Primary Care & General Practice (Picture 21). Last but not least, in 2005-7 the MCFD organised an inaugural Diploma in Family Practice coordinated by Prof. Pierre Mallia that was successfully completed by twenty-seven local doctors and was given recognition by the Medical Council of Malta (Picture 22). Kindly sponsored by St Philip's Hospital, it consisted of eighteen assessed modules and was the first diploma offered by the College and the first formal post-graduate diploma in family medicine organised by local doctors for local doctors.

SPECIALIST STATUS AND TRAINING IN FAMILY MEDICINE, THE MMCDFD AND THE MRCGP [INT]

In 2000, a memo regarding the introduction of a 3-4 year course in Vocational Training in Family Medicine was approved by the Director General (Health), the

Medical Association of Malta and the MCFD. In 2001, lists of criteria for the selection of twelve trainers and one coordinator for the course were approved by the College Council and forwarded to the Director General (Health). In 2003, an agreement on the subject was reached by the Health Division and the Medical Association of Malta, and a call for applications for a coordinator was issued in November 2003, to be followed by a call for applications for the posts of trainers.

In the meantime, in May 2002 the College was invited by the Health Division to form part of the interim Specialist Accreditation Committee (SAC). In November 2002, during meetings of College representatives with the Minister of Health and the Director General (Health), Family Medicine was guaranteed specialist status in the forthcoming Health Care Professions Act. This was confirmed in correspondence exchanged with the Medical Association of Malta, where it was agreed that Family Medicine is put at par with other specialties in the list of specialties, and that family doctors on the specialist list are nominated by the SAC on the recommendation of the MCFD. The new Health Care Professions' Act was passed through the Maltese Parliament in 2003 in preparation for Malta's accession to the European Union in 2004, thus ensuring specialist status for Maltese Family Doctors.

Malta's EU membership made Specialist Training in Family Medicine mandatory and a Specialist Training Programme in Family Medicine (STPFM) for Malta was drawn up by the College's Education Committee chaired by Dr Mario R Sammut and approved by the MCFD Council in 2005 and subsequently also approved by Malta's Specialist Accreditation Committee in 2006. A second version of the programme also edited by Dr Sammut was finalised and approved in 2011.

An Extraordinary General Meeting in 2006 approved an 'MMCDFD Policy Document' setting up the Membership of the Malta College of Family Doctors (MMCDFD) as a degree of excellence, to be awarded after an examination at the end of formal Specialist Training in Family Medicine (Picture 23). The document also set up an acquired rights provision, through which all Maltese Specialists in Family Medicine registered with the Specialist Accreditation Committee were awarded the MMCDFD without the need for an exam on joining the College (Picture 24). On 10th May 2013, the first Honorary Fellowship of the Malta College of Family Doctors was bestowed on the founding President of the MCFD, Dr. Denis Soler (see pages 18-19).

Specialist training in family medicine was launched in 2007 following the appointment in 2005 of Dr Mario R Sammut as STPFM Coordinator, who was subsequently

joined in 2008 by Dr Gunther Abela; both still occupy the role of Postgraduate Training Coordinator in Family Medicine today. Within the 3-year programme, Maltese GPs who had undergone Training Courses in Family Medicine held by the MCFD / RCGP / EURACT in Malta and by EURACT abroad are utilised as GP trainers to whom GP Trainees are attached on a one-to-one basis. On-the-job training is provided 50% in family practice and 50% in hospital specialities, complemented by weekly academic group activities.

Concurrently, MCFD President Pierre Mallia and RCGP President Roger Neighbour signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2006 on behalf of the two Colleges to enable Maltese family doctors to attain the MRCGP [INT] (Picture 25). In this respect Prof. Adrian Freeman, the RCGP's International Development Advisor (IDA) for Malta, worked closely with three successive MCFD Councils presided by Prof. Pierre Mallia (2003-6), Dr Mario Grixti (2006-9) and Dr Andrew P Zammit (2009-11) to ensure that the Malta College's first summative examination leading to the award of MMCFD would also qualify successful candidates to apply for the MRCGP [INT] (Picture 26).

As part of such preparations, a Curriculum Board (2008-10) appointed by the MCFD and made up of Dr Alessandra Falzon-Camilleri (Chairperson) and Dr Daniel Sammut finalised 'A Curriculum for Specialist Training in Family Medicine for Malta' (Picture 27). Moreover, the College also appointed an Assessment Board (2008-10) formed of Dr Andrew P Zammit (Chairman), Dr Doreen Cassar and Dr Patricia De Gabriele to set up the MMCFD summative examination.

Following an MMCFD Pilot Examination held in February 2010 and an MCFD-RCGP Assessment Course for Examiners in Family Medicine held in May 2010, the first MMCFD summative assessment took place consisting of the Work-Based Assessment, the Applied Knowledge Test and the Clinical Skills Assessment. All 11 candidates were successful and were awarded the MMCFD and recommended for certification as Specialists in Family Medicine (Picture 28). In August 2010, the RCGP granted formal accreditation to the MMCFD postgraduate licensing examination for the MRCGP[INT] (Picture 29), which accreditation has since been extended until 2016.

The College approved a proposal from Dr Jurgen Abela that the candidate who places first in the MMCFD summative examination be awarded the 'Saviour Cilia Award' in memory of the late former MCFD Secretary for Communication Dr Saviour Cilia who sadly passed

away on 2nd June 2007, aged 40 (Pictures 21 and 30). That same year, on the 28th August 2007, the College sadly lost another former Council member, Honorary Treasurer Dr Michael Cordina, who passed away at the age of 56 years (Picture 31).

Another 39 GP Trainees (totalling 50 in all so far) have completed training to be certified specialists in family medicine after passing summative examinations held during 2011-2104 under successive MCFD Councils presided by Dr Jurgen Abela (2011-12) and Prof. Pierre Mallia (2013 to date). The Assessment Committee for the MMCFD exam of 2011 was formed by Dr Patricia De Gabriele (Chairperson), Dr Doreen Cassar and Dr Dominic Agius. This committee was replaced in 2012 by a Specialist Assessment and Training Board in Family Medicine (Dr Patricia De Gabriele – Chair, Dr Doreen Cassar, Dr Dominic Agius and Dr Renzo De Gabriele), and then in 2013 by an Assessment Board led by Dr Marco Grech (Assessment Lead) with Dr Doreen Cassar (Lead for Clinical Skills Assessment), Dr Patricia De Gabriele (Applied Knowledge Test Lead) and Dr Dominic Agius (Examiner Lead). After the latter two resigned in 2013 and 2014 respectively, Dr Grech took on the role of AKT Lead while Dr Philip Sciortino was appointed Examiner Lead. A Quality Assurance team led by Dr Tania van Avendonk was also set up to assure the quality of the AKT and CSA. In 2015 Dr Jeremy Stupple replaced Prof. Adrian Freeman as the RCGP's IDA to Malta.

In order to maintain the number of GP teachers and the quality of teaching and assessment being provided, the College organised an MCFD Assessment Course in 2012 and an MCFD Teachers' Course in 2014. Preparations are underway for more courses, both for new GP teachers and also for current ones, the latter in collaboration with the Health Division's Primary Health Care Department.

CONCLUSION

The four areas that had been outlined for future development in the General Practice Subcommittee's 1988 Development Plan for Family Medicine in Malta have all been achieved as follows:

- The Malta College of Family Doctors was founded in 1990;
- A programme of continuing medical education for family doctors was established in 1990;
- A Department of Family Medicine within the University of Malta was set up in 2001;
- Specialist training in family medicine in Malta was launched in 2007.

The family doctor in the European Union today is considered as a specialist and needs specialist training and registration to practise as such. The College has gone beyond the four areas listed in the 1988 Development Plan to fulfil the aim of its 1998 Policy Document towards upgrading the status of the family doctor.

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