

The MCFD at 35 years: looking to the future, supported by the past

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ABSTRACT

Background

The Malta College of Family Doctors (MCFD) was founded in April 1990 with Dr. Denis Soler as President. In tandem, the newsletter 'It-Tabib tal-Familja' was set up, which along the years became the Journal of the Malta College of Family Doctors (JMCFD). In April 2025, a new MCFD Council was elected, with a significant milestone being achieved: the election of the first female president in MCFD history.

Objective

To trace the contribution of women in MCFD Councils over the past 35 years.

Method

Historical review divided in a section on past female MCFD Council members and a section on equity and equality.

Results

It is clear that the election of a female president was not a fluke. It was the result of talented people who over time proved that talent and capability do not depend on gender. Apart from that, it also depends on having a culture that fosters recognition of talent above all. It depends on mutual support and on measures that promote participation with flexibility.

It is important to recognise that women in leadership roles in medicine and academia are disproportionately low compared to the ratio of women to men in medicine and healthcare professions. Thus, it is important to pay tribute to all the women who paved the way for this milestone to be reached.

Conclusion

Whilst auguring the MCFD and the JMCFD a happy 35th anniversary, the Council will keep looking forward to propelling the MCFD forward in excellence.

Keywords

Family medicine, gender equality, Malta College of Family Doctors, primary care.

INTRODUCTION

The Malta College of Family Doctors (MCFD) was formally announced in November 1989 with the first General meeting occurring in April 1990, and Dr. Denis Soler being approved as its first President. It was immediately supported on an international level by the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) and the Canadian College of General Practitioners, with the former even giving a financial grant to kickstart the Continuous Medical Education (CME) programme locally.

Initial membership was also considerable, with 93 doctors gaining membership within the first year, coming from a mixture of both government and private practice. Apart from this, a journal was set up in tandem with the College foundation. Its initial incarnation was the newsletter 'It-Tabib tal-Familja', which through a number of changes evolved into the Journal of the Malta College of Family Doctors (JMCFD) in its current form.

A SIGNIFICANT MILESTONE: FIRST FEMALE MCFD PRESIDENT

This 35th anniversary is also a milestone for a second reason. In April of this year, a new Council was formed, and for the first time in the MCFD's history, a female president was elected. To mark this occasion, I would like to look at previous women who served on Council since its inception.

The first woman to serve on Council was Dr Jacqueline Padovani, who served as treasurer of the MCFD between 1994-1996. It is positive to note that this happened just three years after the MCFD was formed. Nevertheless, there were no female council members for ten whole years after this! The dry spell was broken in 2006 with Dr Louise Gatt serving as honorary treasurer between 2006-2008. In 2009, Dr Alexandra Gauci was elected research secretary and in 2010, she was joined by Dr Pamela Gauci as honorary secretary.

The Council elected in 2011 was one of the first balanced councils with Dr Myriam Farrugia elected as honorary secretary, Dr Doreen Cassar taking on the role of education secretary for training affairs, Dr Patricia De Gabriele becoming secretary of quality assurance, Dr Tania von Avendonk in charge of logistics and Dr Dorothy Zammit being part of the CPD team. Dr Von Avendonk served as honorary treasurer in subsequent councils, whilst Dr Cassar and Dr De Gabriele served as officers in vocational training, with Dr Cassar retaining this position until 2015. I would like to take this occasion to pay homage to Dr Tania von Avendonk, who passed away in 2018. Although my involvement with the Council began a few years later, it is very clear by all that was written about her and by those who knew her, that her hard work left a lasting impact on the MCFD.

In the 2014-2015 term, Dr Anne Marie Scerri and Dr Martina Falzon joined the council as assistant officers on behalf of GP trainees. Dr Scerri, eventually became an Assistant Officer in 2015-2016, with Dr Myriam Farrugia becoming a co-opted member, Dr Elanja Reiff becoming an assistant officer as a GP trainee representative and Dr Nathalie Psaila becoming education co-chairperson. Both Dr Farrugia and Dr. Psaila resigned in 2017, whilst Dr Scerri was co-opted as registrar in 2016-2017, retaining the role until 2018.

In 2017-2018, Dr Alexia Harney became assistant officer for educational activities, whilst Dr Reiff retained her role as GP trainee representative and she was joined by Dr Kristen Buhagiar as another GP trainee representative.

The 2019-2022 Council saw Dr Dorothy Zammit take on the role of treasurer, Dr Anne Marie Scerri being co-opted as registrar and Dr Nathalie Psaila take on the role of education secretary. My involvement with the Council also started in late 2019, when I became assistant officer as a GP trainee representative, a role I retained until 2023. I resigned at that point, since I did not remain GP trainee representative, and was co-opted as an officer in 2024, later on also joining the editorial board of the JMCFD. As can be noted, increased female participation was retained and kept growing. The penultimate Council prior to the present one included Dr Dorothy Zammit retaining her role as treasurer, Dr Anne Marie Scerri retaining her role as registrar, with Dr Marica Galea joining as vice-registrar and Dr Stefania Abdilla taking over CME.

The current Council has myself as President, Dr Esther Galea as assistant secretary, Dr Chanelle Gatt Azzopardi as registrar and Dr Melanie McElhatton as officer in the Education Committee, as well as Dr Yanica Vella who is the national exchange coordinator, a role she has held since 2022. There have been various other female GP trainee representatives across the past few years.

Female participation is not only limited to Council roles. Many women have given and still give important service as part of subcommittees, the assessment team, examiners, trainers and quality assurance officers amongst many other contributions which have allowed the MCFD to survive, thrive and continue to excel.

EQUITY AND EQUALITY

I went through college records and mentioned the name of every woman who served on council for a very specific reason. Women are now entering medicine at a higher rate than men: however, they remain strongly outnumbered in senior management and academic roles. Moreover, this trend, unfortunately, is not correcting itself at the same rate as the number of women entering the medical field. Reasons for this are many, complex and beyond the scope of this short editorial. My intention is not to use this as a pulpit, but as a tribute and acknowledgement of this issue.

Whilst being the first female president is an important and significant achievement, it is not only my own achievement: it is the achievement of every single woman who in their capacity of member of Council laid the groundwork and proved that strong leadership and a strong work ethic depend on individual talent, not gender. We should be proud to have a college which has women across many levels who give active and valuable contribution, and being a college which supports equity and equality in a way which is reflected by numbers rather than empty words and platitudes.

The MCFD has provided a supportive environment and allowed equal opportunities for many years. Initiatives to increase female participation in leadership roles are important, but ultimately it boils down to having a well-ingrained culture which sees abilities and talent first and foremost. It depends on embracing technological advances and other family friendly measures which eventually benefit both men and women. For that, I am immensely grateful to my predecessors as well as my current colleagues.

As president, I do not have any quotas or specific gender corrective plans in mind. The College retains the same vision that allowed me to be an active member of the MCFD: to keep looking for talent and capability, regardless of whether it is a man or a woman seeking to give contribution.

CONCLUSION

I would like to augur both the MCFD and the JMCFD a happy 35th anniversary. I would also like to thank the immediate past president Dr. Edward

Zammit, who has been and still is a major source of guidance and support as vice-president and education secretary. The MCFD is still going strong, and I am very grateful to have the opportunity to help propel it forward in excellence.

SOURCES

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N.B. Information regarding Malta College of Family Doctors Councils from 2018 onwards was obtained from the minutes of meetings, some of which are still not publicly available.

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