

Let's be Positive

Dr Noel CARUANA

During the past nearly thirty years the delivery of health care in Malta has witnessed dramatic changes which have improved tremendously the services rendered to our patients, and this credit goes to all the stakeholders involved, not least the health authorities involved in running this enormous industry.

We now have a number of walk-in health centres spread all over the island which provide free 24-hour assistance seven days a week to all Maltese nationals and visitors alike. This creates some envy in health visitors who sometimes come over at our request with the aim of helping us improve our quality of care. We have a number of private hospitals which offer a choice for treatment and alleviate to some degree the heavy burden which rests on our main general hospital, which will soon we are told, be delegated to the new Mater Dei hospital.

As we shall see in Dr Saviour Cilia's article on Professionalism the trend is that "The influence and authority of medical professionalism is being devalued by strict policies and limited budgets decided by politicians and managers; focusing primarily on health economics and increased productivity. Doctors' participation in management decisions is being given less weight, and medical participants in clinical directorates are becoming less frequent. This has led to strained relationships between managers seeking greater through put and doctors feeling they were doing all that could be done with the available limited resources."

One can see that a basic fundamental principle of good management, that is involvement and empowerment of your ground people seems to be lacking in our Maltese way of doing things. We as doctors on the other hand have to assume our responsibility that sometimes we may be keeping back from involving ourselves more in the "politics" of the game, perhaps a post seventies effect, one would be tempted to ask?

During a recent day conference hastily organised by the Department of Health, one could note the way the policy makers of our DoH perceive primary Health Care in Malta.

One would like to ask... is it true that the input sought for this one day conference was a so called one focus group meeting which was organised one week before the great

event? The invitation was open to all (even though it was practically advertised on the eve of the event!) but alas the really useful stakeholders were not even informed let alone asked to give their input!

Why is it that most speakers expressed their concern that in Malta the Government does not contribute in any meaningful way to Primary Healthcare.....because Primary care in Malta needs to metamorphose out of its 20th century past! Where are the Prevention Programmes?, Where are the screening events? Where is the doctor-patient relationship?... possible only through a well organised primary Health Care system? Where is the real morbidity data if we are still writing our prescriptions using worn-out carbon paper, in our Health centres?

Concurrently with this event, a group of 6 Maltese Family Doctors, were attending a 4-day EURACT course co-organised by EURACT and EU through the Leonardo Project. This course was attended by another 34 Family doctors from a number of European Countries, including Ireland, Spain, Portugal Italy, Greece, Iceland, Hungary, Rumania, Kazakhstan, and Israel.

The aim of this course was to develop further the skills of Family doctors to train their colleagues into better family doctors for the benefit of their patients. These countries value their primary care systems because they realise that a well organised primary care system benefits the country and its people. These countries have well organised doctor-patient or practice - patient registration which favours the much sought doctor-patient relationship. This realisation manifests itself by adequate funding and investment.

Our Maltese family doctors have been doing their best into maintaining a successful and much appreciated doctor-patient relationship against all odds. The set up of the Health centres, even though it has much to be commended for, has failed to surrogate the patient- doctor relationship which

failure has slowly, in part contributed to a Maltese Health care crisis we are now witnessing. We need to explore more this issue to generate equitable and realistic solutions.

Dr Cynthia Grech-Sammut gives us a different dimension of how to practice family medicine. We are witnessing more and more the desire of some of our patients for other forms of healing therapies, and it is senseless to stick our head in the sand and refuse or ridicule this fact! Her first article is merely a taste of what she has in mind to tell us in the coming issues, so keep on reading!

On a much lighter note, Dr Boffa takes us on a journey back in our history to discover how life on the Maltese islands has evolved over the centuries and that “The Maltese Islands have (had) a stream of human life since the very early people, most probably from Sicily here around 5500 B.C. and gradually developed mostly in fertile areas where water was available.”

To ensure that we are giving the right nutritional advice to our patients, we are reproducing (with permission) the

latest guidelines from the EUROPREV (European Network for Prevention and Health Promotion in Family Medicine).

I have also included some information and photographs in a short article on the set up of the Family Medicine Teachers Group and their recent Module on Mentoring and appraisal skills.

Once again I would like to thank those of you who have shown interest in this journal and once more I urge you to contribute your ideas and comments.

Finally I wish you all a happy and cool summer!!

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