Coping with Family Medicine Put-Downs

Dr Noel CARUANA

Family doctors are often devalued in our complex and specialised world. Generalism is often discounted whilst specialisation is highly valued. Even though family doctors are now listed in the specialist register we are still a long way in our endeavour to establish Family Medicine in its rightful place in the Maltese society. Family doctors have an important role to play in opposing this unhealthy competitiveness and systemic denigration of other practitioners. Family doctors are not alone in feeling disparaged, similar forces are affecting nurses, pharmacists and social workers. Family doctors can lead with an attitude that all disciplines in medicine have an important role and all health care providers should be partners with the patient at the centre of the group.

Family medicine is being challenged with providing for the needs of individual patients within an environment undergoing dynamic epidemiological and demographic transitions. Primary medical care is being more and more strained by a widening socioeconomic disadvantage aging populations and re-emerging of old diseases.

Although the situation has improved since old bygone days, the disparagement of family medicine is often endemic in teaching hospitals, medical schools and Emergency Departments and attending Family doctors and Trainees experience it regularly.

In crafting responses to put-downs we should acknowledge the issue but at the same time challenge the stereotyping and injustice and promote better dialogue. What follows are some effective statements used to rebut put-downs.

What?! You’re going to be a family doctor? What a waste of talent!

Suggested response:

a) I’m glad you think I am talented but what do see as the downside of general practice?

b) That’s an interesting comment. But tell me, what do you think would healthcare be without family doctors?

The Family Doctor messed this case up! Why did he have to refer this patient to Casualty when it turned out that the situation was not that serious!

Suggested response:

a) Did you have a chance to talk to the doctor to see his view of the story?

b) Yes errors do happen, however do you think family doctors make more mistakes than other doctors?

c) How do you handle your mistakes when you make any?

d) How do you cope with situations when you don’t know what to do?

The unique, personal and experiential knowledge that resides in every Family Doctor, tightly linked with timely access to evidence based medical knowledge provides the basis of the therapeutic relationship between the patient and his doctor. Effective resource allocation and a true national policy which believes in the value of family medicine as the core of primary care is becoming more and more urgent as we are witnessing more often the staining of secondary and tertiary care settings. Trying to shift secondary care to Primary care settings is not a viable way to solve a complex issue, yet the solution may require the establishing of a “modern model” yet cost efficient health care set up.

Dr Noel CARUANA MD MSc Cert Diab (ICGP) MMCFD
Specialist Family Doctor
Editor, Maltese Family Doctor
Email: noelcaruana@gmail.com