

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF PRIMARY CARE IN MALTA

MEMO TO THE PRIME MINISTER OF MALTA , MALTA COLLEGE OF FAMILY DOCTORS

The Malta College of Family doctors is concerned that successive Governments have failed to acknowledge the intrinsic value of Primary Health Care in the delivery of good quality health care. The lack of interest on the part of the University in this field has compounded the situation further.

Malta is one of the few European countries where Primary Care has not yet attained the specialist status it deserves.

Recent experience has confirmed that while huge financial resources are allocated for the development of tertiary care in Malta, Primary Care remains the Cinderella of medicine and is afforded scant and insignificant attention.

This scenario is not set to change until Politicians / Academics finally discover and acknowledge the value and importance of a properly structured primary care sector.

International experience consistently shows that those health systems with a comprehensive and strong general practice set up go hand in hand with relatively low national spending on health care.

Among countries with a fairly similar, high western standard of living, a World Bank report shows that the estimated per capita cost of health care in 1990 was a lot higher in countries which did not have a well organized system of primary care, thus not exercising a gatekeeper role. In fact, countries like the United Kingdom, Italy, Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands, which have a strong and well-

organized primary care system, all have relatively low cost health care systems (5 to 8% of GDP). This is around 20 to 30% lower than Germany, France, Sweden and Austria. There is no doubt that the level of organization of primary health care in a country has a bearing on total health care costs.

The value of family practice in a country with a free, state-funded system of health care such as ours can be summarised as follows:

"More than 90% of contacts between the population and the NHS take place in primary care. Most serious disease presents first in primary care, most minor illness and much chronic illness is treated entirely in primary care, and most preventive health care takes place in primary care. The clinical decisions made in primary care are of great importance to the patient and to the NHS; they include diagnostic decisions about the seriousness of symptoms as well as decisions about the need for hospital admission and further investigation, about long term prescribing, and about the overall approach to managing illness and social care..."

The above is an extract from the editorial entitled "Research and Development in Primary Care – an NHS priority" which appeared in the British Journal of General Practice in January 1998. It is the fruit of a national experience spanning 50 years.

There is no doubt that the present system of Primary Care in Malta fails for various reasons to fulfill the ideals it should be serving.

The Malta College of Family Doctors has since 1989 taken various initiatives to upgrade the standards of Family Practice in Malta. With the very limited resources available to it, it has created a new professional culture among family doctors, and in medical circles in general, which previously did not exist.

Practically all European countries, including those formerly belonging to the eastern block, acknowledge Family Practice as a distinct specialty and provide training opportunities for doctors wishing to pursue this discipline as a career. This is an acknowledgment of the specialty status of Family Practice and its valuable contribution to society.

The College however firmly believes that if Malta is to fall in line with European standards in this field, Government and University must urgently dedicate the resources necessary for the future evolution of Primary Care.

This will be possible if plans to upgrade this sector are made in the context of the Policy Document approved by the Annual General Meeting of the College held in May 1998, and which we are taking the liberty of presenting to you.

Whereas the College is aware of National Economic constraints, it firmly believes that the present situation in the Primary Care sector should no longer be left unattended. The College is willing to work closely with the present and future Governments to recommend options that are suitable for Malta under the present circumstances.

Any future changes in the Primary Health Care field should include these priorities:

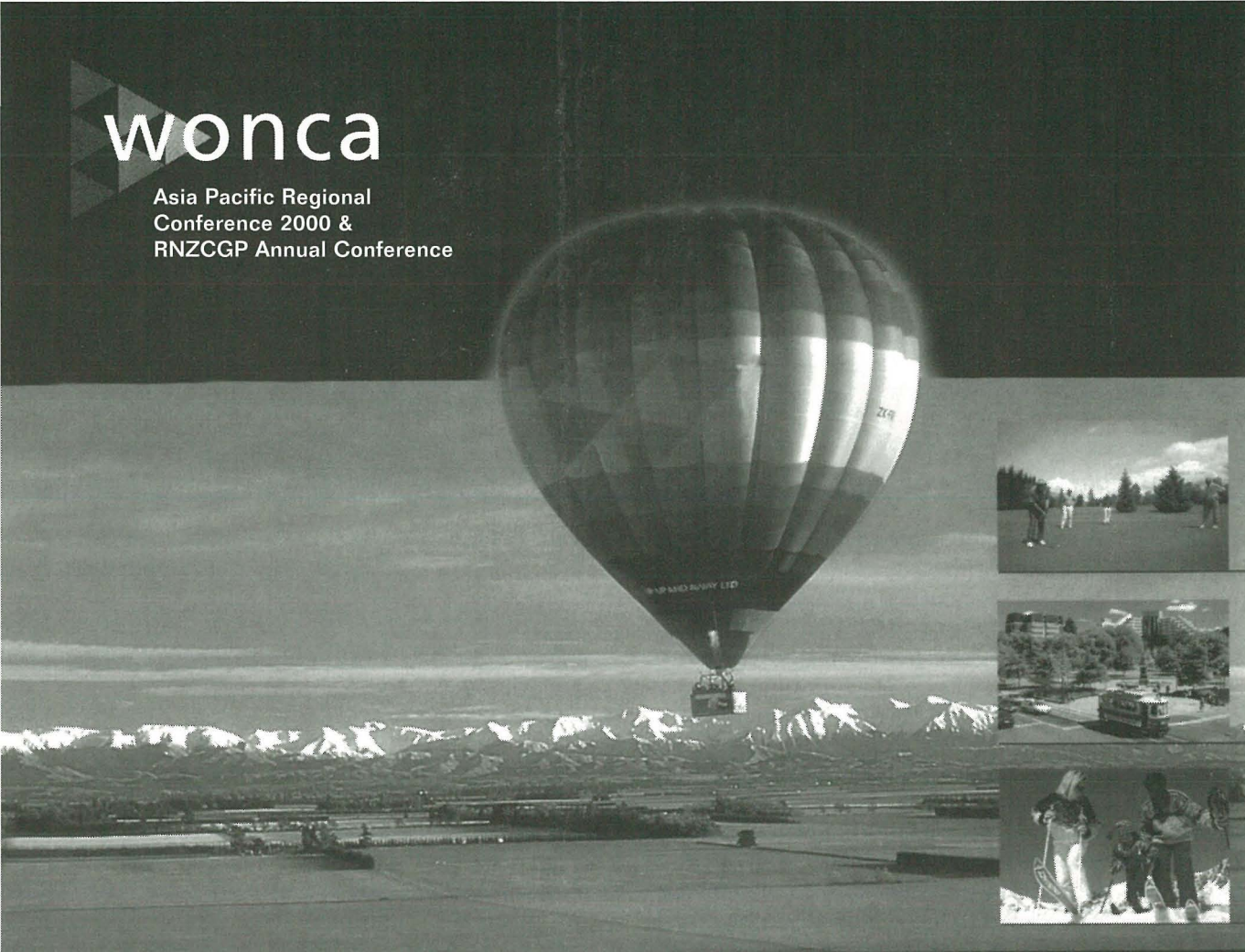
- Appropriate structures to study EU directives, evaluate their interpretation vis-a-vis Malta, and plan strategy for implementation;
- The establishment of a University Chair in Primary Care within the Faculty of

Medicine, and further development of the Department of Family Medicine;

- The harmonisation of private and state provided Primary Care Services;
- Vocational training, ongoing education and specialization opportunities for family doctors.

The College firmly believes that it is ultimately the responsibility of the Government to implement the changes necessary to bring Primary Care in Malta in line with European standards. To this end the College wishes to offer its expertise in this field and anticipates that it will be involved in any future plans for this sector.

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Po Box 1370 Christchurch, New Zealand
Tel: +64 3 379 0390 • Fax: +64 3 379 0460
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