

Real and Virtual Challenges facing Medicine in Malta

Wilfred Galea

Since the early days of medical practice, health care followed a simple and predictable pattern of interaction between doctors and patients. This pattern remained unchallenged for many years. The doctor was always perceived as being the most knowledgeable, and indeed was expected to act in an authoritative manner. Patients were rarely, if ever, expected to participate in decisions regarding their health and well-being. Moreover, treatment options were inevitably limited.

Changing Model of Health Care

Towards the end of the last century, this traditionally accepted model of health care was challenged resulting in the development of a model where complex interactions between doctor, patient, science, economics, ethics, society and the media all play a role. The ever growing list of specialities and subspecialities in the medical field, reflecting advances in patient care and patient empowerment result in moral and ethical dilemmas in the management of certain conditions which until recently would not have arisen. The ethical problems of providing or withholding therapy based on economic constraints have become a reality to be dealt with in everyday practice. In this respect, the family doctor's role as gatekeeper to secondary care services, as well as patient advocate, is being increasingly recognised.

Advances in Technology

There is no doubt that advances in technology over the last fifty years have exceeded advances in the last five thousand years. These have influenced all aspects of medical practice ranging from understanding of the most common illnesses to the diagnosis and management of rare or novel conditions. Undoubtedly, advances in the understanding and development of new pharmacological therapies, sophisticated diagnostic investigations and the ability to perform sophisticated interventions have left a profound influence on the practice of medicine with a significant reduction in mortality and morbidity as well as improvement in quality of life. Economic considerations however, are increasingly creating barriers in the equitable availability of benefits to all members of society.

eHealth

eHealth has never been included in medical school curricula but the way we practice and the way we interact with each other and with our patients is being shaped by eHealth.

Wilfred Galea MD

38 Triq Guze Cutajar, Dingli RBT 11, Malta
Email: wilfredg@thesynapse.net

Often erroneously associated with the narrow dotcom perspective, eHealth is defined as the application of information and communications technologies (ICT) across the whole range of functions that affect healthcare, from diagnosis to follow-up.

Some even consider eHealth as '*the single most important revolution in healthcare since the advent of modern medicine, vaccines and even public health measures like sanitation and clean water*'.¹

Entire areas of 'traditional' health care depend on informatics. Hospital laboratories are heavily computerised and many analyses, especially in biochemistry and haematology are fully automated. Similarly, modern imaging techniques are heavily dependant on informatics. Other significant areas include prescription aids for the prevention of medical errors. Telemedicine has enabled access to specialised surgical techniques by operators in remote areas, to expertise for discussion of difficult cases and patient monitoring which previously were inconceivable.

Such programmes are proving to improve both outcome measures and result in significant cost benefits. In Malta, TheSYNAPSE Direct, is increasingly being used by physicians as a secure Internet based service for access to results from diagnostic laboratories and diagnostic imaging clinics. It is also used for statutory reporting of infectious diseases and vaccinations to the Department of Health.

The number of health care professionals and patients who are using the Internet for health care related reasons is steadily growing throughout the world.

Recent surveys² show that:

- In the US, more than one in four physicians (26%) access the Internet for more than six hours a week for work-related purposes
- Health news is the type of information most commonly searched for by physicians. In France, 89% of physicians search for health news at least once a week
- Physicians use medical journals most often when looking for health information. For example, in Germany, 88% of physicians read medical journals at least once a week
- General health websites are the most popular online resource, with 44% of UK physicians accessing health information through this channel at least once a week
- Concerns about security and the cost of access remain the most important barriers preventing physicians from using the Internet to find health information

Over the years, one can observe definite trends in the use of Internet for health related reasons by consumers. Reasons for accessing Internet include seeking medical professional's sites,

discussing Internet findings with their physician, searching for drug information, seeking a second opinion and emailing their physician³. Once again, in Malta, TheSYNAPSE is serving as a source of health news to a large proportion of local health care professionals.

eHealth is rapidly gaining tremendous importance in modern health care systems. Members of the medical professions and administrators should encourage the adoption and dissemination of eHealth initiatives.

Mobility

The ease and freedom of mobility, which is available, has an influence on health care. Joining the European Union is expected to have a significant effect on the mobility of both patients as well as health care professionals. The Maltese Medical School has a tradition of producing fine, caring physicians who have always distinguished themselves when pursuing careers abroad. Inappropriate working conditions could lead to loss of expertise to centres of excellence overseas.

Non Medical Considerations

Rapid developments and treatment options have inevitably led to increasing cost and expense. Providing or denying treatment on the basis of cost and affordability is rapidly

becoming a reality in every country, even in highly developed countries. Various solutions and funding models are being proposed and adopted by various countries. The success or otherwise of these models will have a profound effect on equitable health care delivery and may also have ethical implications. Medical professionals and administrators need to be involved in the development of a model of a sustainable, equitable health care system, in particular analysing the immediate, intermediate and long-term effects of these decisions.

We are faced with rapid changes and increasing challenges. These challenges dictate the need to develop a new model of health care. It is time to introduce creative problem solving and thinking skills in medical undergraduate and postgraduate curricula for these are the basis of all innovation. Continuing professional development needs to focus on those issues to ensure quality of care in an equitable health care system.

Though change does not necessarily mean improvement, there can be no improvement without change.

References

- 1 http://europa.eu.int/information_society/europe/ehealth/conference/2003/index_en.htm
- 2 8th HON Survey, Health On the Net Foundation, May-June 2002
http://www.hon.ch/Survey/8th_HON_results.html