

Message from the Director Institute of Health Care

Sandra Buttigieg

Fifteen years have passed since the Institute of Health Care was founded within the University of Malta. In line with advances in health care professional education worldwide, and indeed with advances in medical knowledge, technology, health service delivery and care, the University of Malta forged ahead and raised the professional education of nurses, midwives and professions allied to medicine onto an academic platform. The Institute was set up to develop diploma, degree and post-graduate courses in Communication Therapy, Dental Technology, Environmental Health Science, Medical Laboratory Science, Midwifery, Nursing, Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy, Podiatry, and Radiography. Furthermore, the Institute earned a sound academic standing in the interdisciplinary Master and Post Qualification Diploma in Health Services Management that has attracted medical and pharmacy graduates in addition to our own health care graduates. It is with great satisfaction to report that fifteen years down the road, the Institute of Health Care has steadily grown in esteem and recognition both within our University as well as with our counterparts internationally.

The strategic vision is the focus on the development of a professional health care *team* that can provide good quality of care through an integrated and holistic service. Our mission statement is that of *achieving excellence in the education and training of reflective, caring, accountable health care professionals, in response to the health and health service needs of the population.*

The initial years proved difficult with the main emphasis being that of securing sound academic development of the Maltese lecturing staff. So what happened over the years was that foreign lecturers, who were recruited to establish the various Divisions within the Institute, were replaced by Maltese staff. The vast majority of the academic members of staff have successfully completed postgraduate degrees at master and doctoral levels. This achievement provided the foundations for slowly but surely advancing the courses that were on offer. For example, over the past five years, the certificate course in nursing was abolished and most of the diploma courses have been phased out to focus on the degree programmes as befits an academic institution of historical standing such as the University



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of Malta. Furthermore, we took great care in inviting well known external examiners from universities of international repute to audit our courses and examine our students. To give an example of our determination in ensuring the highest academic standards, the B.Sc. (Hons.) degree has been successfully recognised and accredited by the Council of the Institute of Biomedical Sciences (UK) such that Malta is now one of six countries to be awarded the UK IBMS accreditation. Furthermore, a report submitted by the delegation of technical experts from the

EU Commission (TAIEX) that visited the Institute in February 2002, shows that the courses in Nursing and Midwifery have attained European standards.

Therefore, I can picture the development of the Institute of Health Care as occurring in phases. Phase one has been the establishment of our undergraduate courses with a firm academic standing. Phase two can be described as the successful running of several postgraduate courses at post qualification diploma and master levels in Environmental Health, Health Services Management and Nursing. In the near future, we intend to maintain our momentum in offering postgraduate courses in all the disciplines within the Institute. Phase three is our greatest challenge, that is, activating recognition as a research institute. Aware of the financial restrictions currently prevailing at the University of Malta, we are involved in a number of collaborative research projects with other academics from other universities. Some of these projects have been secured through direct contacts with visiting academics or through bilateral agreements signed with other universities. Furthermore, the Institute through the Communication Therapy Division has been awarded a *Marie Curie Fellowship for Transfer of Knowledge*. This in itself includes a research project that is being conducted in collaboration with the University of Newcastle as well as academic continuing development projects through exchange of staff. This award is ample proof of the experience gained over the years in successfully completing grant applications and international project proposals.

This leads me on to what has always been regarded as a major priority for the Institute of Health Care, namely the establishment of international links. It is with great pride to note that the Institute of Health Care has been on the forefront

and among the first within the University of Malta in actively participating in programmes organised and funded by the European Union. I will give some examples. For the past eight years, we have successfully organised yearly *Erasmus* Programmes in Communication Therapy, Nursing, Physiotherapy and Radiography, when on average, we have hosted fifty students yearly across disciplines. Additionally, our students also benefited from this opportunity and were hosted by a number of partner institutions from all over Europe. Apart from Europe, we have also established links with some of the top universities in the USA, which led to a number of occupational therapy students spending a semester there. We are also hosting yearly summer schools for faculty and students from James Madison University, Virginia.

The Institute of Health Care is justifiably proud of its achievements in the short period of its existence. At the very beginning, recruiting students to join our courses required a sound marketing exercise. Recruitment campaigns eventually shifted from attracting numbers to any course, be it at certificate, diploma or degree, to actively promoting our degree courses. The Institute has gained a sound reputation to the extent that we do not need to advertise our courses anymore. The number of students now stands at 850. Until last year, our graduates all found employment in the health service. Due to financial constraints, automatic employment is however not on offer anymore and indeed, the last group of graduates had to struggle to secure employment. It is indeed important to recall the great effort that went into developing the Institute. It would be short-sighted to project problems in employability for health care graduates, when it is well known both from local and international experiences how numbers in the health care professions tend to fluctuate over short periods of time. It would also be short-sighted to lose health care professionals trained in Malta to other European countries, from where interest in recruiting IHC graduates has already been shown. Therefore, we need to take stock of the situation and make sure, together with our stakeholders, of maintaining our position as an academic institution to continue providing well-educated and trained health care professionals.

This leads me on to argue that the Institute of Health Care does not and must not work in isolation. First and foremost our close cooperation with the Department of Health is a must and should not only continue but indeed be strengthened. Secondly, it has also become very important that the Institute of Health Care and the Faculties of Medicine and Surgery and that of Dentistry should enter into a new phase of dialogue and collaboration. A step in this direction has been the recognition of our degree courses as entry requirement into the MD course as well as into the course leading to Master of Science in Public Health. At the same time, our course leading to a Master of Science in Health Services Management has attracted a significant number of medical doctors. This is a clear reflection of how health service delivery has become a team effort and therefore, neither the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery nor the Institute would benefit by working or developing in isolation. The introduction of interdisciplinary credits in the undergraduate curriculum and more postgraduate courses will further help in achieving team-building as from the student days. Furthermore, an area of close collaboration between IHC and the Faculties of Medicine and Surgery and of Dentistry could be developed in multidisciplinary research projects, which are increasingly being accepted for publication by peer-reviewed journals. It is envisaged that Mater Dei Hospital should bring all of us at least in physical proximity. Whatever alliance will develop in the future, the autonomy and contribution of each profession should be respected and recognised.

I believe that as an Institute, we can look forward with confidence. In the coming years, the main impetus should be on strengthening our research activities as well as relations with our principal stakeholders. Finally I wish to reiterate my gratitude to the Chairman of the Institute of Health Care, Professor John Rizzo Naudi, who played a vital role in starting off and developing the Institute as well as to the academic and non-academic members of staff for their dedication and sense of loyalty. The achievements mentioned above would not have been possible without the support and hard work of these people.