A FAMILY MEDICINE RENAISSANCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Anyone even remotely involved in academic, organised or medico-political family practice will know that the proverbial "potjie" is cooking, transforming the firewood, ingredients, and spices into a new, hopefully very enjoyable, feast of a "family medicine" meal.

The firewood fueling the fire of change and transformation comes from many sources. There were divisions in the past, some based on disagreements over monetary matters in the early eighties and some along political and/or racial lines. The meal ingredients were the many organisations in family practice, such as the South African Academy of Family Practice/Primary Care, the College of Family Practitioners (CFP), the National General Practitioners Group (NGPG), the Family Practitioners Association (FPA), and some others.

The spices of change are the harsh realities of our time: financial constraints, limited human resources and, especially, division in the face of a world "hostile" towards family practice. This has slowed down the development of academic family medicine at some of the universities and has resulted in a system of postgraduate vocational training which largely ignores the needs of family practice, almost introduced by the Interim South African Medical and Dental Council (ISAMDC).

Decay also come on many fronts. The SAAPP faces severe financial constraints as a result of fierce competition in the advertising marketplace. This has led to the closure of its publication division and a declining membership. Similar fates awaited the NGPG and other groups, whilst family practitioners had to pay membership fees to several organisations in order to have their interests adequately served. The CFP was confronted by a weary academic community demanding greater unity since, with limited resources, its members were no longer prepared to support two fellowship exams in addition to their own university exams.

What followed during the past two-and-half years was a sometimes frustrating process of talking, lobbying and finally negotiating. The main players were the SAAPP and the CFP, with the university departments of family medicine acting as agreement-broker. Others like the NGPG, the FPA and others adopted a supportive and "wait and see" role. The process gained greater impetus with the formation of FAMEC during 1997, a consortium of university departments of family medicine now acting in greater unity.

The cook was ready; the fire was burning; the ingredients were in the pot and the spices were working. Finally during September 1999, at the 11th Family Practitioners' Congress at Sun City, both the SAAPP and the CFP passed resolutions to merge and form an independent and united College of Family Medicine (CFM). A period of 18 months was envisaged for negotiation with the College of Medicine of South Africa, the present home of the CFP, about a possible merger.

The new CFM will be open for general membership to all family practitioners and will set the standards for the discipline through a fellowship exam and a programme of accredited continuous professional development (CPD). A grandfather clause is envisaged in the early years to allow all family practitioners presently registered as family physicians with the ISAMDC to obtain fellowship of the CFM. It is envisaged that this new fellowship qualification will in future be the entry qualification into registration as family physician and in years to come, independent family practice in South Africa.

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