

New beginnings



This will be my last editorial as the academic head of the Department of Family Medicine and Primary Care at Stellenbosch University. At the end of February 2009 I will be saying farewell to a great team of colleagues, students and administrative staff at my long time alma mater. Like Julius Caesar of ancient Rome, I know that this “crossing of the Rubicon” is a point of no return and it will hold inevitable consequences both for me and my former department. But I also remember how Caesar was slaughtered at the hands of his friends and colleagues on the senate floor, because he presumably wanted to be king and did not have the foresight to step down in time. He should have followed the example of Naas Botha who retired from rugby when he was on top of his game. Like Naas Botha I have decided that the best time to get out is whilst people still want you there.

The end of an era is always the beginning of a new one. New leadership will undoubtedly move in at Stellenbosch and take the department to new heights. I plan to be “on tap” for them if they need to draw on my experience, but someone new with a new vision will be “on top”. Likewise, this situation will give me the time and energy to explore my new vision and dreams, on a different front. I will become a scholarly publisher of academic journals and books, and help academics to publish their research, particularly on the internet. South African Family Practice will also benefit from the expertise of the new team of IT specialists and publishers that I have brought together for this new enterprise.

When I look back on my academic career as head of family medicine at Stellenbosch University, spanning a period of 18 years, a few things stand out for me. I was involved in all these initiatives, sometimes leading them, but I cannot take the sole credit for any. There was always a team of people involved in these achievements:

1. The firm establishment of family medicine as an undergraduate and postgraduate medical discipline in South Africa. This initially happened against severe opposition within the medical schools.

2. The establishment of a rural family medicine training platform in the Western Cape. This was certainly not unique in the country, but for Stellenbosch University it was a paradigm shift.
3. The collaboration with other universities and our colleagues from Belgium (ICHO), supported by VLIR funding, to establish a common curriculum for postgraduate training in family medicine. This laid the foundation for the later specialty and common standards.
4. The development of the internet mediated distance education modules for the MFamMed and diploma in Family Medicine at Stellenbosch University. This enabled us in 2007 to offer specialty training at sites far from the university, even in other countries.
5. The achievement of family medicine becoming a specialty and the establishment of a full time registrar program in 2007. This was a real team effort from all the family physicians serving on the Medical and Dental Professions Board.
6. The agreement with the Provincial Administration of the Western Cape, Department of Health, to allocate 80 registrar posts in the province for the training of family physicians. Dr Joey Cupido, deputy director general responsible for district health services in the Western Cape Province deserves credit for his foresight in this matter.
7. Finally, the establishment of South African Family Practice (SAFP) as a recognised and respectable academic journal. In 1998 there were 4 manuscripts for consideration on my table and SAFP was facing an uncertain future. Today we have more than 100 manuscripts in consideration for future publication. SAFP also set the standards for other journals in electronic publication in 2005, and that decision laid the foundation for my new career in scholarly publication.

I will remain involved in organised family medicine for the foreseeable future. I will continue to serve the profession as a Board member of the Academy and a Council member of the College of Family Physicians. Both these organisations will play a key role in the further development of family medicine as a specialist discipline in the years to come. I will also be continuing my duties as editor-in-chief of the South African Family Practice journal, at least until the end of my term, December 2009.

If you see someone with a brown hat walking on the beach in Langebaan, with a camera dangling round his neck, take a minute and say hallo. That might just be me trying to balance a new career with more enjoyment in life.

Towards the future!

Pierre de Villiers
Editor