



Is Family Medicine in Sync? [Reflections on Stellenbosch 2003]

The 12th National Family Practitioners Conference took place in the Music Conservatoire at Stellenbosch on 8 – 10 August 2003, amidst the shivering mid-winter cold and drizzling rain of the Cape. The welcome rain that came as the delegates arrived broke a prolonged drought in the region, but it did not discourage 250 enthusiastic delegates to engage in their scientific discourses, debate the issues of the day and enjoy each other's company. The conference had a comforting and intimate ambiance. Maybe it was the rhythm of the Conservatoire, or the fact that the cold and rain kept the delegates huddled together in the warmth of the building, but it certainly made a pulsating event!

It is difficult to single out highlights during such an excellent conference. The setting and venue were certainly great, the catering and overall organization good and the program well balanced with something for everyone. The plenaries featured striking and eminent speakers like Clem Sunter and Jerry Coovadia, and leaders in our discipline like Ian Couper, Shadrack Mazaza and Marietjie de Villiers. For me the highlight in the plenaries however, was the short and impromptu philosophical paper by Jannie Hugo, entitled "Partners for Life and Health, or Partners for Profit and Wealth", demonstrating his brilliance and his admirable personal vision for family medicine.

The whole conference took place against the backdrop of far reaching upcoming changes in our health care system and the HIV/AIDS catastrophe. The district health system will soon be rolling out and there was a lot of debate how that is going to change the way family doctors work and live. There was also a lot of debate on rural health and what should be done to improve rural medical services. The government is soon going to introduce medical assistants, also known as "barefoot doctors" to relieve the shortage of medical manpower in the rural health services, but yet there was a strong feeling that it is not doing nearly enough to attract and keep doctors in the rural areas. This did not make good vibes with the delegates.

There were two other exceptional performances during the conference. The one was the WONCA special tract aiming to strengthen international collaboration and further develop the African Region of the organization. It makes good sense for WONCA to reach out to the African continent, maybe not in terms of immediate gains, but surely in terms of a longer term investment. Family Medicine is poorly developed in the region and needs a lot of support.

The other great performance was the ICHO-FaMEC workshop tract on vocational training. The Medical and Dental Professions Board will soon consider the introduction of compulsory vocational training for the new specialty of general/family practice in South Africa, and if approved, there will be a huge need for trainers. We salute the Flemish delegation and the Belgian people for their continued support of primary care in our country. We will work very closely with them over the next 3 years to introduce a pilot vocational training project in 8 university-linked training sites.

And then there was the *magnus opus*, the crescendo, when it was announced during the conference that the government has finally bowed to the unprecedented global pressure, and announced the introduction of an anti-retroviral programme for people suffering from HIV/AIDS. The conference ended in the high note of a declaration, read out by Bruce Sparks on behalf of the delegates, welcoming the long awaited decision by the government.

The music of the night came as we celebrated national Women's day during the social evening on the 9th of August at Spier wine estate. Imagine, red wine, women's day and.....captivating speeches by 3 of the leading ladies of our discipline. Our own "Jerry Springer" (Saville) Furman kept us entertained and then humble by introducing us to the "old boys" who attended the first ever GP Conference in South Africa. Viva to them!

A final high note was the number of research papers presented at the conference. I counted at least 50. This is a clear sign that the discipline is well on its way to reach maturity. It was also clear that the Family Practitioner's Conference is becoming a true discipline conference with less emphasis on CME, and the main focus on research, as it should be. Congratulations to the winners of the best research papers sponsored by Discovery Health: Dr T Kerry "The development of patient-held records in the Thukela District" (best presentation); and Dr P Yogeswaran "Learning medical communication in the 1st year: The UNITRA experience" (best poster).

The notes at the Conservatoire may have gone silent but the music of the conference keeps on lingering in our brains and souls and we again feel strong and confident that we can play with the best in the world and that we are indeed "in Sync" with the health needs of the people and developments in the rest of the world. Viva Stellenbosch 2003! Viva the organizers!

Pierre de Villiers
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