

Beyond WONCA 2001

The 16th World Congress of Family Doctors held in Durban (13 – 17 May 2001) was indeed a major triumph for the organisers, Dr Garth Brink and Prof. Bruce Sparks, and the hosts, the South African Academy of Family Practice/Primary Care. A total of 2288 delegates from 76 countries attended this important event on the international congress calendar, with 659 from South Africa and 739 from Scandinavian countries alone! This gave the event a distinct international character, aptly held in a city with many cultures. Delegates could experience family medicine from all corners of the world, from even as far as Iceland! The venue was also splendid, the ICC in Durban added real lustre to a truly memorable event.

To me the highlight of the congress was definitely the interaction with fellow family doctors from all over the world, to experience again that we as family doctors belong to a much larger international “family”. Family medicine indeed has many faces as it is practised in many countries of the world, but we all share the “principles of family medicine”. It was good to measure one self against their standards of practice and skill – and great to discover that we measured up pretty well in most respects. As Michael Pather, one of our South African stars in the plenary on EBM, put it: “We can be proud of what we do on EBM in South Africa.”

The opening speech of the congress undoubtedly set the tone for the rest of the congress. Dr David Satcher, the US surgeon general and a family doctor by training, encouraged family doctors to undertake, as he sees it, four major roles in their practice of family medicine:

- They must take responsibility for leadership in improving health systems in their country and promote equity, as globally 90% of resources are invested in just 11% of the population
- They must help to develop a more balanced community health system, with prevention and clinical medicine receiving equal attention
- They must help to bridge the gap between science and the practice of medicine, referring to the successes of vaccination and fluoridation of water
- They need to put the whole patient together again as medical science has separated the patient into limbs, organs and even genes. It is the role of the family doctor to treat the patient as a whole within the context of family and community

“Family Doctors must help to bridge the gap between science and the practice of medicine.”

WONCA aligned itself very strongly behind the international movement to combat HIV/AIDS through its new president, Dr Michael Boland from Ireland. He called on family doctors worldwide to maintain the fundamental values of equity, high quality and cost effectiveness, while keeping the essential qualities of humanity and rationality in fighting the dreaded disease. Professor Jerry Coovadia of Durban reminded delegates that the worst was still to come in the epidemic but added that those fighting HIV/AIDS are learning fast how to use the tools of prevention and effective treatment.

In another one of the highlights Dr Wendy Orr of Wits, in her plenary on

“Health Human Rights and the Family Practitioner,” spoke about her fight against the prison authorities and police in the Eastern Cape in the heydays of Apartheid during the mid 1980’s, whilst she was a district surgeon. She left delegates in awe about the power of one woman’s lonely fight against a terribly unjust system.

The academic program was more than overwhelming, with more than 848 papers presented as free papers, posters or workshops. Notably, South Africans presented 127, the single largest component from any one country. In many of those papers more than one author participated, which brings me to the real impact of the congress for South Africa. It was clear to me that family medicine made great strides as an academic discipline over the past 10 years to be able to provide such a feast of papers in one congress!

WONCA 2001 also said goodbye to old friends and welcomed new leaders in family medicine. Dr. Robert Higgins from the USA retired as WONCA President and

Dr Wes Fabb retired as CEO. We thank them for their great efforts to promote the development of our discipline internationally and wish them a well-earned retirement. Our own Professor Bruce Sparks was elected as the new President-elect, and he will become WONCA President at Orlando, Florida in 2004. Congratulations Bruce, we are all immensely proud of your achievement and we thank the WONCA Council for the honour they have bestowed on our country through his nomination.

WONCA 2001 in Durban was a great event; see you in Orlando, Florida, October 13-17 in 2004!