

The South African Academy of Family Practice/Primary Care regrets to announce that Russell Kirkby has relinquished his position as Editor of SA Family Practice. We thank him for his contribution to the Journal and to the Academy.

The position of Editor will be advertised shortly, and in the interim we will be using the services of guest editors.

CARING FOR THE COMMUNITY

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Too frequently one hears comments that private general practitioners do not meet the needs of the 'community' and have no commitment to 'community issues'.

I was told some years ago by a senior health department official that "family practitioners in the private sector had failed to address the elements of the Declaration of Alma Ata and the call for health for all by the year 2000 — they were only interested in their own patients and making money. They are therefore irrelevant in the greater plan of things!"

I have often reflected on those flippant comments, particularly in the light of present remodelling of the health services and the associated role of family practitioners in the proposed district health model.

When were private doctors ever chartered to take responsibility for endemic disease on a national basis, ensure adequate water and sanitation for all, execute immunisation programmes for the community and carry out other tasks designed for 'health for all'? Were they ever financially contracted to do so, or was it something to be done in their spare time?

What of the communities that constitute the patient bases of their practices — are they any less 'community' than those cared for by public sector doctors, purely because payment is received from a different source for the care they receive? They too have their particular health needs.

I sense that what was really meant was, "What does the private sector do for the poor and indigent in the community?" I have often been overwhelmed by how many private practitioners voluntarily assist and work in communities that could otherwise not afford their services.

I have been equally touched by the GPs who have recently made generous donations to the Rural Health Initiative of the Academy. As readers will remember, this initiative is aimed at improving the health of under-served communities though national educa-

tion programmes for rural practitioners and other health workers. Under-pinning the educational programme is a nation-wide communications network which will, hopefully, link all Academy members and those in rural and under-served areas to libraries, databases, other practitioners, academic departments, the Internet and innovative educational programmes.

I was in Durban recently to organise a planning workshop for the Academy's Rural Health Task Group that is leading the initiative. What an inspiration these practitioners are. They were from all provinces of the country. Given the poor circumstances, conditions and lack of academic and clinical support that some rural hospitals endure, it is absolutely amazing to witness the dedication, enthusiasm, wisdom and clinical competence of these doctors.

After an exhausting Saturday workshop, one GP at McCord's Hospital told me he had to now go and operate on a patient with a perforated peptic ulcer. I said, "You look tired, can't someone else do it?" Without any hesitation he said, "This is my life, I love it!"

They are in many ways the epitome of what many young people aspire to be when entering medical school — the fully competent carer, curer, operator, appreciated healer, who can manage most of the problems that most of the people have most of the time!

In many of South Africa's towns and cities there are similar 'salt of the earth' practitioners. It does not matter whether they are privately or publicly funded. They are firstly family practitioners, who *do* care for the communities they serve, and are themselves trusted and devoted members of those same communities.

A list of the most recent contributions received for the rural programme appears in this issue of the journal. I would earnestly request readers who have not yet associated themselves with the initiative to do so. Help us to help the child who says, "When I grow up, I want to be alive!" ●