

## The Declaration

Along with last month's SA FAMILY PRACTICE, there was an insert, a "Declaration about the Role of the Doctor in Primary Health Care". It is important that readers understand where it is coming from.

For some years now the Ministers and Directors General of the Department of National Health and Population Development have spoken about the importance of general practice and primary health care. Until the last few months of 1989, however, we have witnessed masterful inactivity associated with all their pronouncements. Recently there has been a serious effort to get things going and accompanying it, an openness to discuss matters that is unprecedented. In this process the Department of Health has released a document spelling out their understanding of primary health care. To my knowledge they still have not appointed a purposeful and representative advisory subcommittee in this field.

A workshop was arranged on the initiative of the Academy and the National General Practitioners' Group to respond to this document. The DECLARATION is the result of this work. We hope to publish a booklet soon with a full report of the proceedings.

Our intention with the Declaration is to participate in this debate that the Department has opened. We support their emphasis on primary health care, but are very unhappy with the documents produced by the Department to date. In essence the whole of primary health care is seen primarily as a nursing activity and there is room for pharmacists and every other form of health worker. Doctors, however, are merely mentioned as an afterthought and

then their role is defined in terms of the role that nurses play.

We, as general practitioners, family practitioners, primary health care doctors or generalists are largely to blame for this. With some notable exceptions we have not been there where the greatest need is. We have minded our own business and to a large extent not participated in forward planning. We have not adequately shown our concern for the primary health care needs of the poor and the marginalised people of South Africa.

With the present constitutional debate there is a concomitant debate about a health care system for the future. It is vitally important we all take part in this. There are approximately 10 000 generalist doctors in the country. We have a contribution to make. The system can however be structured in such a way that we are ignored and not able to play a significant role. Whether this happens or not, will depend on us. We need to give time to this debate. We also seriously have to address the issues at stake: the establishment of an affordable, equitable, humane and accessible system for all in our country.

*Sam Fehsen*