

# Friend of South Africa honoured as International Five Star Doctor

Awards are meant to honour people for selfless achievement and to inspire others to do the same.

During the October 2004 WONCA World Congress in Orlando, USA, the first "WONCA International Award of Excellence in Health Care – the 5-Star Doctor" was awarded. The award is for a serving physician, with the following characteristics: "caring provider, decision maker, communicator, community leader and team member". Candidates needed to be practising physicians who have developed innovative ways of health care delivery, are involved in international cooperation and are active at academic level (research, training and quality assurance).

The award was presented to Jan De Maeseneer from Ghent in Belgium. Jan is an old friend of South Africa. He played a critical role in the establishment of FaMEC (Family Medicine Education Consortium) in 1997 and is the promoter of the Belgian funded project to optimise family medicine training in South Africa. This project assists integrating family medicine and community oriented primary care principles into health care in SA.

Jan's life story is an inspiration. As a medical student in Ghent he was an activist; raising money to support liberation movements in Southern Africa and organising alternative socially responsive lectures at medical school. As a young doctor he set up a multi-disciplinary health centre with his wife Anita De Winter in the poorest area of the city. Against the trend of free market health care in Belgium, they established a capitation-based health centre Botermarkt in Lederberg, a deprived area in Ghent. This centre serves people

from about 50 different cultures, mainly socially vulnerable groups, and contributes to the accessibility of health care for refugees and asylum seekers. They apply Community Oriented Primary Care (COPC) and over the years achieved the following:

- developing a multi-disciplinary team;
- pursuing community oriented diagnosis;
- structuring care at the level of the neighbourhood;
- making health care accessible to poor and neglected people;
- tackling epidemics in the community;
- providing inter-cultural care.

They demonstrated and documented how to address the important health problems in the population, striving more effective, more efficient, more timely and safer health care and securing fairness and equity towards those in greatest need.

From this ongoing experience as a practising family doctor, Jan serves his passion for COPC by acting locally and thinking globally. He is never afraid to take on established powers, but does it by providing an alternative model in practice and involving other people. He is involved in local and national health politics by advising the health policy makers in Belgium, Switzerland and the European Union. He plays a major role in policy changes throughout Europe to invest more in primary care based on the needs of the population.

As head of the Department of Family Medicine and Primary care at Ghent University, he directs a large post-graduate and research programme and recently headed a complete transformation of the undergraduate curriculum. Within a short period of time,

he was able to reform the traditional teaching to a community oriented, evidence-based one. The health problems encountered by the frail and the vulnerable in Lederberg feed directly into this new curriculum.

Apart from Jan's involvement in South Africa, he also directs international exchange and development programmes in Bolivia and Cameroon.

Asked to give advice to family doctors in South Africa, Jan hesitated and said that he took his inspiration for COPC from the 1940's work of Dr Sydney Kark in Kwazulu Natal. He does not want to advise but has the following reflections for family doctors in South Africa:

1. Improvement of health is multi-axial, including education, optimised service delivery and a needs-based health (care) policy.
2. Create and show evidence of our contribution to the health of local communities.
3. Family medicine development to be in the broader context of a team approach.
4. The role of the family physician is clearly in community and ambulatory care in clinics, health centres and private practices.
5. Share and collaborate with colleagues in the rest of Africa, especially SADC and East Africa.

We congratulate Jan for winning this award. Family physicians will continue to be inspired to create care based people's needs and evidence; to reflect on what we do and to collaborate with others in order to serve the people of Africa.

**Prof Jannie Hugo**