



## Chronic Illness - The New Opportunity

For the decades I have been in practice it has struck me that we are better at diagnosing chronic disease than caring for people with chronic illness. Of course we are able to build up an impressive reputation if we deal only with acute and self limiting disease but this is no longer possible with the increasing burden of chronic illness in our world.

There are several reasons to take hold of the opportunities that chronic illness presents us in family practice apart from that "it is the right thing to do!"

- Couper makes it clear that chronic illness par excellence needs a commitment to an ongoing relationship and an unfolding understanding, and life style change in which the patient and doctor are partners.<sup>1</sup> Is this not what we pride ourselves to be about in family practice? "Let's do it!"
- Economically this may become the lifeline that many in general practice are looking for. If we deliver cost effective quality care to people with chronic illness we will become the designated service providers for the bulk of chronic care for thinking Medical Aid Societies and Managed Health Care Organisations.
- Work satisfaction is a major reward for those who are able to improve the quality of life of a person living with a chronic illness and its concomitant disability.
- Working with chronic illness confronts the practitioner with the full complexities of living and suffering. When we are able to focus rigorously on these complexities of disease and living with disease there is the benefit of knowing

that we are facing a major challenge. Not one that just any person can deal with. A challenge for which family doctors have been more specifically prepared than any other.

- If we do the job well there will be a very clear distinction between the quality of outcomes from generalists and others who confine themselves to one aspect.
- Chronic illness requires teamwork and therein lies another reward for us. As we work together we enhance our service and reduce the isolation that many of us live with.
- The more common a disease becomes no matter how difficult to deal with, the more it becomes the duty of those in the primary health care field, i.e. generalists and clinical nurses to take up the responsibility of care. There are just not enough specialists or specialist units to go around. Without our involvement there can be no equitable access for the whole population.

It is thus very important for us to seriously take up the challenge of chronic illness. If we do not respond to this challenge that is presented to us in the growing number of people with chronic illness we stand to lose our relevance in the health system.

Let's do it for our patient's and our own sakes

**G S Fehrsen**

### Reference:

1. Couper ID. Further reflections on chronic illness care. SA Fam Pract 2007;49(4): 4-11