Education

General practitioners for the new age
Igor Švab

The development of continuing and undergraduate education in
genral practice is reported from Slovenia, with particular reference
to the organization of workshops.

Medical education should reflect the needs of society, particularly in connection with the
delivery of primary care. Strategies for achieving this vary from country to country because
differences between health care systems.

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In Slovenia, primary care was provided only
through health centres until 1992, and all
providers were salaried public employees. In
general the public believed that even primary
care was best delivered by specialists.

With the recognition of family-oriented pri-
mary care as a new model for the health care
system in 1992, added significance was given
to general practitioners. This reform made the
deficiencies in the knowledge of general practi-
tioners increasingly apparent. Previously,
vocational training covered clinical matters
and some public health principles but not other important areas, including skills in com-
munication, management and leadership.

Deficiencies in the health care system caused
significant problems for general practitioners:
providers were poorly motivated because of a
lack of incentives; resources were inadequate;
and certain management problems were
attributable to the great diversity of and poor
cooperation between professionals working
in health centres.

In 1983 a group of general practitioners
attached to the General Practice Section of the
Slovenian Medical Association, recognizing
the need for continuing medical education
among their colleagues, decided to organize
annual workshops for them. The purpose of
the first workshop was to prepare general
practitioners to be tutors for students. It was
also decided to introduce a three-week course
on general practice at the undergraduate level.

Until 1992 the teachers were mostly general
practitioners who had learned the principles
of modern medical education at a five-day
WHO course offered annually in the Inter-

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the Institute of Public Health of the Republic of Slovenia,
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University Centre, Dubrovnik, Croatia. The Slovenian teachers used the English-language materials as a basis for workshops conducted in Slovene. Since 1992 a similar international course has been run on a yearly basis in Slovenia. Thus a nucleus of teachers in general practice has been developed who now teach not only their colleagues but also undergraduates.

The themes of the workshops from 1983 to 1994, during which period the number of participants rose from 55 to 137, were:

- teaching methods in general practice;
- home visiting;
- death and dying;
- equipment in general practice;
- the family approach;
- time management in general practice;
- burnout;
- research in general practice;
- communication skills;
- management in practice;
- clinical record-keeping;
- quality assurance in general practice.

The format for the workshops has usually comprised an introduction, practical work and a plenary session including a report or presentation given by the participants. The workshops have provided the core material for the first Slovenian textbook on general practice.

Each workshop has usually been held close to the place where the participants worked. A general practitioner in the area acted as local organizer. The participants were asked to complete a suggestion form as a means of improving the workshops and gathering proposals for future topics.

Workshops on specific subjects related to general practice were well received, and the learner-centred approach together with a good mix of work and social activities proved highly successful.

Administrative costs were covered by registration fees, which were paid by the participants and reimbursed by their health centres.

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In 1994 a small grant was given to the organizers by the body responsible for national health insurance.

Undergraduate medical education has been undergoing reform in parallel with the development of the workshops. A six-year medical course has been introduced and it was decided that seven weeks should be dedicated to a new component dealing with family medicine. General practitioners responsible for organizing the workshops are invited to run the programme, and the students thus have good role models.

It took over 10 years to improve the knowledge base of general practitioners adequately and to win recognition of general practice as an academic discipline. This was achieved without substantial external support, thanks to the enthusiasm and vision of general practitioners willing to adopt a new approach to education even though they had had little formal training as teachers.

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