

A true sense of collegiality

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Anniversaries serve several purposes – they are milestones that have been achieved, a time to commemorate and celebrate – but they also provide an opportunity to reflect both backwards and forwards.

This year is the 25th anniversary of the ICGP and we have much to celebrate. We should pause and view with some objectivity what has been achieved and use this as a stimulus to meet the challenges ahead.

Prior to the advent of the ICGP, general practitioner care was delivered by a cohort of under-valued, hard-working and extremely dedicated doctors whose work always seemed to be over-shadowed by that of their specialist colleagues. GPs were often single-handed, individualistic, educationally and professionally isolated and working in an atmosphere of competition and unhealthy rivalry. There was no widespread training structure and virtually no recognised career pathway. A minority of GPs maintained an interest in and were sustained by the various academic activities arranged through the Institute of General Practice, based in Lansdowne Road, or through the Irish-based faculties of the Royal College of General Practitioners.

The foundation of the ICGP occurred through the work of a small core of visionary yet very practical colleagues who were all full-time, working, general practitioners. Their efforts would not have attained significant success without the goodwill and widespread support of the general body of GPs in the country and current analysis would indicate that we are still surfing this wave of enthusiasm.

The main areas of interest and influence for the ICGP are in education, training and standards. The College engages with

various bodies like the Department of Health and Children, the HSE, Medical Council, IMO, sister colleges, a plethora of representative organisations at a national level and with the colleges of general practice from other countries on a worldwide stage through WONCA.

A glance at the home page of the ICGP website (www.icgp.ie) gives a flavour of the range of services and facilities available to members. Educational pursuits are through the various GP training programmes, courses, distance learning programmes and the CME network which has proved to be very effective in reaching out to GPs working at the coalface throughout the country.

The ICGP was instrumental in the campaign to have general practice recognised as a specialty in its own right by the Medical Council and more recently has defined a set of core competencies for general practice on which specialist training is based.

Various guidelines generated by members have been published and are available through the library service as are Impact documents which summarise important issues in a concise, practical format and are designed to be used as a reference 'on your desk'.

The Management in Practice arm of the college provides training and advice on matters relating to business issues pertaining to general practice. The Health in Practice programme encourages doctors and their families to be proactive about their own health and has established a network of doctors and allied health professionals who have an expertise in treating colleagues. The college has been to the forefront among the specialties within the profession in

...ultimately striving towards a better service for our patients



*Mark Walsh, chairman of the ICGP –
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recognising and discouraging the practice of doctors treating themselves. Research activity is increasing and involving more and more GPs at a very practical level throughout the country. There is continued development and refinement of the ICGP examination, the importance of which is often not fully recognised by the broader membership.

Perhaps one of the major achievements of the college has been the establishment of a true sense of collegiality among GPs. This has been particularly facilitated by the CME network which gave a forum to GPs to come together in a non-competitive, non-threatening and co-operative atmosphere of common purpose where old barriers soon crumbled. Levels of self-worth and esteem are higher and concepts such as standards, competence, service and professional development are important to GPs.

The publication by the Department of Health of the Primary Care Strategy in 2001 broadly supported the ICGP's stated contention, based on international research and informed commentary, that a greater emphasis on delivery of health care through primary care would result in healthier society (based on several objective outcome measures) in a more cost-efficient manner. Unfortunately, progress in implementing the strategy has been frustratingly slow, but we will continue our efforts to promote the merits of general practice/primary care.

What of the future – what lies ahead for general practice

and the ICGP? We find ourselves in difficult times with the prospect of many challenges ahead. As a college we have formulated and published a strategic plan which will guide us forward over the next few years. We will be looking at our role in the area of advocacy and partnering with patients, reviewing the college's interaction with members, the internal alignment of college resources and our role in the implementation of the Primary Care Strategy.

Our current GP contract serves nobody well – ourselves, our patients or indeed the paymasters. It is out-dated and not appropriate to the requirements of modern general practice. The ICGP can make a valuable contribution in formulating a new contract which is cognisant of the potential and value of general practice in the context of the changing demography of GPs and their patients.

The interaction of general practitioners with the newly-formed clinical directorates throughout the country is an opportunity for us to co-operate with our hospital-based colleagues in a more meaningful way, ultimately striving towards a better service for our patients and perhaps a more co-ordinated approach to the management of chronic illness.

Congratulations to all concerned for the achievements of the past 25 years. We can progress towards the future with pride, confidence and determination to build on our success in espousing the highest standards of general practice for ourselves and our patients.