

A daunting role in education for a non-GP

Nick Fenlon



Nick Fenlon – My first day in the ICGP was a memorable one

For a number of years before I started working with the ICGP I was manager of a voluntary sector company called AIDS West. This organisation was based in Galway and it had two functions: Development and delivery of sexual health education programmes and providing psychosocial support to people living with HIV or an AIDS-related illness.

During my time with AIDS West I met a number of people who were very positive about the clinical care they received from their

GPs but I also met many who expressed concern about how they felt when visiting a GP, eg. some felt the GP was uneasy or even disapproving about them because they were gay or a drug user. Coming from a background in psychology, I decided to explore these concerns and met with Professor Andrew Murphy and Maureen Kelly who were both working in NUI Galway in the department of general practice. Together we developed a module on attitude awareness and delivered it to fifth year medical students.

This encounter with the department of general practice in NUI Galway was my introduction to the world of education with general practitioners.

Through working on a very part-time basis with NUI Galway, I was introduced to GP training programmes both in Galway and in the midlands. I was given the opportunity to meet and work with trainers in particular. An interesting

position as assistant programme director with the training programme in the midlands was advertised – they were looking for someone who would bring a psycho-educational element to training with a particular focus on communication skills and the consultation. I was successful in my application for this and am still working in this position one day per week.

From here I had occasion to visit the ICGP and was asked to facilitate a number of sessions on small group teaching. From the outset the impression of the ICGP I had was a very positive one. The staff members I met were all courteous and seemed happy and even proud to be working in the college.

In 2002 the position of director of the distance learning unit was advertised. The unit had been set up in 1999 by Michael Boland and Margaret O’Riordan. Margaret introduced the diploma in therapeutics and later introduced the diploma in women’s health with Ailis Ni Riain. Reports on this unit were very positive and even sending in an application for the position was daunting, particularly given that I wasn’t a GP! But the prospect of working in the college was an exciting opportunity. I saw it as both a challenge and an opportunity.

I remember that each applicant had to submit a written statement on how they saw such a unit develop into the future. Mine was based on providing a five-star quality assured range of distance learning courses for general practitioners. One of the basic tenets that I have held onto is that all courses should be relevant and practical for GPs. The interview was a pleasant experience and an encouraging one.

Just like the first day in school my first day in the ICGP was a memorable one. Fionán and Dermot made the introductions and gave me the grand tour. One of the things that made the move easy was the fact that Louise Nolan, the administrator who worked with the distance learning unit since its inception would be still working there. Louise was a walking encyclopaedia of knowledge on the workings of this unit. I soon got a good insight into what was involved in this

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impressive venture.

I got some good advice many years ago about taking up a new post: "Find out why things are done the way they are before you go changing anything!" So this is how I spent the first few months.

From day one it was very clear that the college placed a high value on continuous education and the phrase 'life-long learning' was the reality in general practice. But another stark reality is the fact that GPs are very busy in their profession and home life. So the real challenge was to develop and provide quality education that was relevant but also education that could be delivered in a user-friendly manner.

E-learning had received mixed reviews in the media – can a 'correspondence course' really be truly educational? In order to establish ourselves as education providers we had to underpin all our programmes with quality assured policies and procedures. This resulted in some very high standards of education which I personally am very proud of. But this brought its own challenges – we are providers of education for established GPs, not a postgrad group seeking to climb a career path. I have often been told that GPs don't need more qualifications and as long as courses are endorsed by the ICGP that's all that is needed. But the college is committed to high quality education and the quality assurance policies and procedures that enable this.

The continued development of distance learning into e-learning has opened doors for many members. It means that education is brought into the practices and homes of members. We are able to provide immediate high quality modules accompanied by electronic discussion – I think this is something that couldn't be visualised 10 years ago, let alone 25 years ago.

Since I started, the range of courses has expanded from therapeutics and women's health to diabetes care, palliative care, mental health, geriatric medicine, occupational medicine, smear taking, practice management for registrars, CBT, minor surgery, medical education, and we have just launched a new course in musculoskeletal examination and management this year. We are delighted with the continued uptake of our courses by ICGP members and non members and continue to deliver and develop new programmes.

While the focus of our education has been with members living in Ireland, the e-learning method of delivery has attracted participation by many overseas members.

Another venture which developed under my reign is the ICGP summer school. This project is very different to the e-learning method of education as it brings people together for workshops. We have held three very successful summer schools using a format of parallel workshops with a mix of clinical topics, management, self-development, IT and medico legal sessions taking place each day.

We embarked on this project in order to meet the needs of those who learn best by active participation at workshops. One of the most gratifying aspects of this project is when you see new faces attending.

The atmosphere has always been relaxed and the education standards very high.

We have also hosted roadshows in different parts of the country. We are always exploring new ways of making the continuous education of our members both relevant and user-friendly and I am always open for suggestions on courses or study days.

The next big venture for me is the college application for HETAC recognition. Such recognition will put our courses on a par with any university and make them even more valuable at a time when academic credits are valuable commodities. We will be transparent to the world and our quality and standards will have been tried and tested.

It continues to fascinate me when I look back over the history of the college and the huge strides it has taken in such a very short time. We have placed ourselves well in facilitating the continued education of GPs in Ireland.

For me it has been an exciting challenge since day one. I so appreciate the opportunities I have been afforded since joining the ranks of the staff of the ICGP. We have a brilliant staff at every level of the college. The e-learning unit is administered by a very capable team of Louise, Caitriona and Maureen. The interest and commitment of this team is admirable.

My personal thanks must go to Fionán who brings out the very best in us all, is generous with his support and subtle in his guidance.