

Toe-dipping in the water of GP training

Margaret O’Riordan

Having completed my GP training in 1990 I began working in general practice in Tipperary. Encouraged by my colleagues I joined the local South Tipperary ICGP faculty and CME small group where I found invaluable support and understanding for a young doctor starting out on her career. Before long I became PRO and found myself delivering a regular slot on the local radio station on behalf of the faculty.

In 1994 an opportunity to dip my toe in the water of GP training arose. The late Fiona Bradley had taken one year leave of absence as assistant programme director on the RCSI training programme to complete her general practice research in Southampton. Fiona was a wonderful doctor and teacher and I was proud to act as a temporary tutor in her absence with the support of Kieran Harkin.

In 1995 I became assistant programme director on the Midlands Training Scheme. This was a wonderful opportunity to provide small group teaching and exposure to planning and administration of a new training programme with a supportive and encouraging programme director, Ger Kidney. Several trainees that I have had the pleasure of teaching during my five years in the midlands are now GP trainers and the programme has grown to the largest in the country with 64 trainees.

In 1995 Dermot Folan came to facilitate a session on practice management on the day release programme. Always on the hunt for new faces (some things never change!) Dermot discovered I had just completed a diploma in counselling. He asked me to consider joining the ICGP counselling subcommittee. I can clearly remember my first meeting of this committee in the Glen of the Downs in Wicklow.

The warm welcome and genuine interest in my contribution was a sign of things to come and has always permeated my interactions with both college staff and GP colleagues. In 1996 Austin O Carroll and I wrote ‘Counselling in practice – a



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guide for general practitioners’ on behalf of the counselling subcommittee. Apart from the tortuous rewriting of several drafts it was a thoroughly enjoyable experience to work on this document and with Austin.

The following year I received an unexpected phone call from the ICGP chairman, Michael Coughlan asking me to become chair of the membership committee and of the task group on computerisation and a member of the college executive. I was honoured and over the next three years gained valuable experience in all college activities including the planning of the Lincoln Place HQ and WONCA 1998.

In 1998 I became the Director of the Quality in Practice programme at the ICGP. This was a half-time commitment with the aim of setting up a distance learning unit for the

first time in the college. I had just commenced a BA in adult education and training at NUI Galway through distance learning which was very helpful in setting up the first course – the diploma in therapeutics, run since 1999.

Michael Boland was very supportive in this development and in introducing me to the EQUIP group (a European primary care network of 26 countries working for quality improvement in general practice). One month after commencing the post I found myself substituting for Michael and representing Ireland at an EQUIP meeting in Iceland. It's all hands on deck when required at the college. I was the Irish representative to EQUIP and a member of its executive committee for the following eight years. This was a good opportunity to develop links with GPs right across the EU.

In 2000 I began work on a second diploma course on prevention in general practice, which was to run alongside the therapeutics course. It soon became apparent that this was too onerous a task for one part-time person and Ailís ni Riain joined me as joint director of the distance learning unit. Together we worked on developing new courses and improving the existing courses, including delivering workshops to support the courses in Malta – true distance learning! In 2003 due to continued success it was clear that the distance learning unit required a full-time director.

I had taken up the part time position of National Director of Specialist Training in General Practice – a new post created in 2000. This post was also becoming increasingly busy. Ailís had developed an extensive Women's Health Programme and a commitment to the Medical Council which was requiring more and more of her time. Reluctantly, we decided to step down from distance learning. Nick Fenlon was appointed as director and the unit has gone from strength to strength under his management.

The post of National Director of Specialist Training in General Practice has grown from a blank sheet on day one in the year 2000 to an interesting, challenging position. There is a long established and proud tradition of GP training in Ireland. Several vocational training programmes preceded the establishment of the ICGP and have grown both in size and number over the past 38 years. The current 13 programmes are distributed throughout the country.

A patient-focused health service needs a strong primary care sector to provide holistic care and promote appropriate use of services and resources. The recent Expert Group on

Future Skills report states that the current intake of 120 GP trainees appears inadequate to meet service requirements and needs to be increased to a minimum of 150 and even 160 if the increasing demands of an aging Irish population are to be met in general practice.

A recent report on the structure of Irish general practice shows that virtually all doctors entering general practice are now vocationally trained. Demand for entry to GP training is consistently high with 360 applicants for the 120 posts advertised in 2009. Two studies of Irish practice-based GP trainees illustrated a high level of satisfaction with their training. This bodes well for the future of general practice. Recent recommendations that more medical undergraduate, intern and postgraduate training should take place in the general practice setting have obvious implications for the capacity of general practice to deal with training issues.

A primary care-led health service needs a strong general practitioner presence. Currently there are high standards in general practice and in general practice-based training in Ireland. We hope that we can maintain and improve on those standards in the years to come.

My tasks include organising the national conferences for GP trainees and trainers, providing general support for all involved in GP training, representing general practice on committees such as the National Committee for Medical Education and Training and the Forum of Postgraduate Training Bodies and negotiation with the HSE and other stakeholders.

In 2003, the core curriculum committee was formed under my chairmanship and produced the first Irish definition of general practice (based on the European definition of general practice modified for the Irish context).

I have continued my interest in quality improvement by chairing the ICGP Quality in Practice Committee which oversees the annual quality improvement prize and the production of impact documents on relevant clinical and non-clinical topics. I have recently stepped down after five years as chair. I have also continued to work in the same general practice with my colleague, John Curtin in Ballingarry, Co Tipperary for the past 19 years.

While every day brings new challenges one thing remains constant. That is the unwavering committed support and "can do" attitude of all ICGP staff and colleagues epitomised by Fionán Ó'Cuinneagáin, CEO.