

Bruno Kissling, Chair of the organizing committee Wonca Europe Conference 2009 in Basel

Swiss Family Medicine on its stony way to a higher academic league



This article shares my personal experience with Family Medicine (FM) in Switzerland looking in the mirror of Wonca. I shall highlight a rapid development, out of a deep academic underdevelopment, with a remarkable influence from Wonca and its fascinating way to steer complex systems: offering space to exchange, developing common ideal goals, targeting equity, respecting different particularities,

facilitating change and supporting independent ways to develop high quality FM adapted to the country's own environment and available possibilities.

After my first contact with Wonca, as a Swiss delegate at the European conference 2000 in Vienna and at the World conference 2001 in Durban, Family Medicine in Switzerland no longer seemed to be as strong as I had assumed during my 5 years of postgraduate education and 18 years of practice as a family doctor.

To which college do you belong? A simple question but difficult to answer to the questioning colleague regardless of whether he came from Nigeria, Sweden or wherever. With complicated comments about our special situation I had to explain that we didn't have institutes of FM at the universities in Switzerland – whereas there were, self-evidently, such institutes worldwide. From such experiences, Switzerland seemed to me to be a developing country, when concerning academic FM.

The number of Swiss participants at Wonca Conferences at that time was almost countable with the fingers from one hand, and the number of scientific contributions was even smaller. Research in FM was nearly not existent. In addition, the awareness about the need of specific research in Family Medicine was scanty. I was worried about that!

Laughing groups of young Dutch general practitioner (GP) trainees made me happy but pensive about the situation in Switzerland. Here young doctors in postgraduate education do not really know which colleagues in their hospital department are also on their way to becoming a family doctor. Additionally many young doctors today still don't know about the goal of their own postgraduate training. A career plan doesn't exist. From this basis, how is it possible to train young GPs and build up a corporate identity among them?

Hearing about practice based vocational GP training, with regular workshops about GP specific competences, knowledge, skills and attitudes woke me up. In Switzerland the number of real GP training jobs in general practices is still small. Therefore, as a consequence, the practice shock is hard when young family doctors start their private practice, where they meet patients and illnesses they never have seen during their mainly hospital based education.

The active cooperation for the "European definition of general practice / Family Medicine 2002" was a corner stone for FM in Switzerland. It verbalized the scientific and academic value of FM, and showed its specificity and complexity – FM being more than the sum of the specialties GPs apply in their daily work. It became the theoretical foundation of the agendas for teaching, research, daily practice and quality of FM. It shows the direction toward which FM should be developed with respect to the different health systems, financial and personal resources and possibilities of each country. Among other national forces the Wonca definition played an important role for the revision of the Swiss regulations of postgraduate education and continuing professional development. Therefore it helped to empower academic FM in Switzerland!

In Ljubljana 2003 the idea was born to organize a European Wonca Conference in Switzerland. In Kos 2005 our bid was approved by the Wonca Europe Council. From the beginning all Swiss family doctors were unanimously enthusiastic about this project. In addition, and always with a view of our Wonca Europe Conference 2009, some urgently needed developments in the field of FM in Switzerland got supported.

An outline of the main positive points gained in Switzerland, over the last few years, includes: institutes of FM from zero to four among five medical faculties; rapidly growing research activity in FM, also appearing at Wonca Europe Conferences; FM got a basic element in the pregraduate education; rising numbers of GP practice based vocational training places; conversions beginning to change mainly small practices into big GP practices; restructuring of emergency services following the examples of Denmark and The Netherlands; the founding of the Society of Young Doctors in Switzerland, out of the European Vasco da Gama Movement; the founding of a new society "Swiss family doctors" in Basel (17 September 2009) joining all doctors working as GPs, who were previously only united in different medical societies.

However, beside all these positive and attractive developments there still exist many important threats for FM. Regulations from the National Health Ministry, hostile to GPs, go on to devalue the attraction of the profession for young doctors. This is a dangerous approach by the government with regard to the needs of the population, with its growing number of chronically ill people.

FM in Switzerland is on the way to the higher academic league of FM but there is still much to do! With our further imperturbable efforts and with continuing support from Wonca we will get there.

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