

## FROM THE MEDICAL CHAIR

# General Practice & the National University Health System



**A/Prof Benjamin Ong, Chairman Medical Board  
National University Hospital**

The National University Hospital (NUH), the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine (YLLSM) and the Faculty of Dentistry at the National University of Singapore (NUS) formally became the **National University Health System (NUHS)** in the first quarter of 2008. This new joint venture plans to build on the strengths of the hospital and its connections with the National Healthcare Group as well as considerable resources of NUS to promote excellence in clinical care, research and teaching.

As part of this integration, Family Medicine was moved from Community, Occupational and Family Medicine (COFM) to become part of the new enlarged Medicine Cluster of NUHS within the hospital. This re-alignment is no trivial exercise and is in keeping with the tripartite mission of NUHS making the Division of Family Medicine a clinical academic unit.

The initiative recognises the key role that general practitioners play in the healthcare continuum in Singapore. I would like to address some of these foundational roles briefly in this article as our GP Partners will now have even more opportunities to expand their professional influence.

## Excellence in clinical care

At the National University Hospital, the cornerstone of the tripartite mission is the patient. The vision of excellent clinical care is pivotal regardless whether we are referring to complex cardiac surgery or preventive care. This is also about doing what is right for the patient based on best evidence, as well as getting the overall processes of care right. The latter includes ensuring that care delivery is in the right setting; hence care is often best delivered effectively in the community and by GPs.

We plan to build this coordinated continuum from hospital to community and back. Our Family Medicine division will help to set these parameters and work at Specialist Outpatient Clinics in interface clinics, participate in the polyclinics as well as with General Practitioner Partner groups and individual practices.

It also means making a reality a connected and patient-centred medical record with the core information available to all who provide care. This will ensure that processes and practices adhere to parameters of care and really push for excellence.

## Teaching and training

The delivery of medical care is overwhelmingly ambulatory. Care of the commonest chronic diseases occur throughout the whole healthcare continuum, the largest proportion being ideally in the community. Given these facts, the training as well as the delivery of teaching needs to shift to a more ambulatory mode, with delivery carried out in the primary care settings.

Hence, GPs must participate more in training the future doctors for Singapore and be properly equipped and resourced to do so. The closer integration and coordination of undergraduate as well as postgraduate training of doctors is, therefore, a key aim of having Family Medicine become an integral part of the hospital system. This facilitates leadership roles for general practitioners whilst allowing access to expertise in teaching pedagogy, curriculum design and assessment methodology.

## Research

Research relevant to patient care is an essential element of an academic institution. GPs can be much more involved in such worthwhile endeavours. By the very nature of work, GPs have access to large numbers of patients with common conditions and chronic diseases including diabetics, hypertensives, hyperlipidaemia and ischaemic heart disease. This means that, with proper coordination, involvement in treatment trials even as care is delivered can access large patient cohorts.

Research in the area of health services delivery and surveillance for disease outbreaks are other areas in the realm of community medicine.

## Conclusion

We have opportunities for GPs to enrich their overall practice beyond mere delivery of care. This should result in more active and appropriately recognised roles in academic missions including teaching and research. The leadership of NUHS would welcome our GP Partners' active engagement in any or all of these areas.