

From Flanders with love

1 April 2003 was the official start of a three year co-operative project between FaMEC (South Africa's Family Medicine Education Consortium) and ISHO, the Interuniversity Consortium about Training for Family Medicine (Huisartsenopleiding) in Flanders, Belgium.

This co-operation will be exceptional in many ways:

First it is the result of an historical meeting in September 1998 when the Consortium was formed with the support of the four Flemish academic centres for Family Medicine, during which all Departments agreed that training for Family Medicine should be made compulsory for every doctor aiming to work as an independent family physician in the South African health care system. This objective has been agreed to by the Health Professions Council and will become a requirement from 2009 for all new graduates.

From the Flemish side it is the first time funds are being given to an international co-operation between North-South partners in the domains of Family Medicine and education.

For South Africa it means the realization of a dream of our beloved friend Prof. Dumo Baqwa from UCT, whose determination was the basis of the first contacts between the Flemish and South African departments.

In Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) as well as in South Africa, the development of Family Medicine as a discipline and its pivotal role in the realisation of the Primary Health Care concept are at stake. Graduating doctors leave the country (even in Belgium, to the UK or the Netherlands!) and the profession. Family Medicine seems to have lost its attraction to new generations of graduating students because of the long working hours, the isolation in the profession and the difficult context within which it is practised (open market with fee-for-service, bureaucracy, insecurity, medical insurance...).

However, family physicians themselves, expressed by WONCA, and on many occasions supported by the WHO¹, are convinced that a competent family doctor is essential for cost containment in the health care system² and for the realisation of health for all through provision of comprehensive, multidisciplinary primary health care for every individual and his or her local community.

It is clear that this high quality postgraduate education for Family Medicine will depend on skilled staff of well equipped Departments of Family Medicine, as well as on the availability of a nation-wide network of very many self-confident, enthusiastic, but also reflective and eager to learn practitioners and health centres, prepared to offer a supportive and dynamic environment where new graduates can evolve to the primary care physicians that the various communities of South Africa deserve. In August, a delegation of five Flemish ISHO-staff members will attend the 12th National Family Practitioners Congress in Stellenbosch and pay visits to various South African departments of Family Medicine to exchange views on the selection and training of future trainers.

At the *Dies Natalis* celebration of Ghent University "honoris causa" doctorates have been presented both to Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations and to Prof. Chris van Weel, president of the Research Committee of WONCA. By the award of these doctorates our University recognised the importance of international co-operation and of the development of Family Medicine in order to achieve equity and universal well-being. Both are objectives of this exciting ISHO-FaMEC co-operative project.

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References

- ¹ Improving health systems: the contribution of Family Medicine. A Guidebook. WONCA & WHO, 2002.
- ² Starfield B. Is primary care essential? *The Lancet* 1994;344:1129-1133.