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Memories of Wonca 2003 in Ljubljana

Like many of you, I have a collection of slides that I take on my travels abroad. Among them, one has a special place: it was taken in Palma de Mallorca in May 1999 only a few minutes after Slovenia was successful in bidding to host the 2003 Wonca Europe conference. I am staring at the camera with a very worried and confused look on my face ... At the moment when the picture was taken, I had suddenly realised that I was engaging in an adventure that could be very risky and would certainly influence my life in the future. The expression on my face reads: "What have I let myself in for?". In 1999, Slovenia was still a new country. Although tourism was expanding, the country was still relatively unknown to the average European. The main danger was that Ljubljana would not prove an interesting location for family physicians, and that the conference could be a disaster which would ruin the Slovenian college.

Serious work started behind the scenes relatively early. We managed to set up a team of young, motivated and enthusiastic friends. It was surprisingly easy to find people willing to work voluntarily in organising the event. The group consisted of many doctors with additional skills not normally found in the medical profession. They were not only skilled practitioners, but had also become media experts, financial managers and experts in general practice research, education and quality. Janko Kersnik, head of the organising committee, surrounded himself with a brilliant team of workers. We were extremely fortunate in finding a first rate conference organiser to take over the lion's share of the preparatory work.

My task was to run the scientific programme and to promote the conference at the international level. This involved speaking at closing ceremonies in Vienna, Durban, Tampere and London. The promotion strategy was to show Slovenia as an exciting, almost exotic venue in Europe that family physicians would be interested to visit. So I did not concentrate on the scientific programme or the keynote speakers: my presentations were strictly about tourism, and I promised the participants heaven on earth: good food, a friendly atmosphere, and tourist attractions. Nobody believed me, of course, but at least I won their attention and some laughs.

Over the years, the stress slowly accumulated and it has reached its peak within the last six months. The first information on the poten-



tial success or failure of the conference was the number of abstracts we received. We set up a web-based system of submitting abstracts which worked very well. Most applications were received in the last two days and our concern was great a week before the deadline when only a few abstracts had been submitted.

Finally, the opening day arrived. We planned it in two parts: a formal part at the conference centre and a more relaxed opening at Ljubljana Castle, in the open air, with fireworks, drummers and speeches. The formal opening went very well: there were only three speeches and a little music. Then the participants were supposed to move to the castle either on foot or by bus, which caused the organisers no little anxiety on account of the weather. The forecast was very bad: a thunderstorm was announced for the evening and it rained heavily during the formal opening. The opening at the castle was supposed to take place only a few hours afterwards and we were concerned that one of the main conference events might be spoiled. However, we were lucky: the rain stopped during the formal opening and the participants' enjoyment of the open air entertainment was untroubled.

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During the conference the organising committee's room was a hive of activity, with participants rushing in and out making last minute arrangements and meeting other people. Although the organising committee was under heavy stress, everything finally ended remarkably well: the conference was a success, participants were satisfied and there were no major hitches.

We felt some concern about a group of mysterious participants who had registered for the conference but did not appear in the conference centre even to collect their documents. Later it transpired that these fifty participants had decided it was much more interesting to tour Slovenia and spent their time at Bled instead.

At the end of the closing ceremony the organising committee took a bow in front of the auditorium. We were exhausted but content that four years of hard work had eventually produced the desired result. When we left the stage the organ started playing Beethoven's Ode to Joy, now the official anthem of the European Union.

In the end the conference arrangements went off very well and family physicians from all over Europe had a most enjoyable stay in Ljubljana. The financial result of the conference had a major impact on the development of family medicine in Slovenia. The money we earned has assisted us in ensuring regular attendance at meetings of international family medicine organisations. We have spent some of it on translating guidelines for family physicians into Slovenian. We also received wide media coverage: family medicine was a key theme in the medical media for at least a week. But most important: our guests from all over Europe enjoyed the friendliness and hospitality of the Slovenian people – all that I have promised to deliver during my speeches at closing ceremonies. Heaven on earth was no longer a dream, it was reality.

Now, almost six years after the Wonca Europe conference in Ljubljana, I still believe this was one of the riskiest ventures I have undertaken. But despite the many risks involved, Ljubljana is still remembered as a successful conference.

Occasionally people still remember Ljubljana as the last small conference of Wonca Europe: the number of participants was well below two thousand. The following years' conferences on Kos, and especially in Florence, Paris and Istanbul, were much bigger successes in terms of numbers of doctors participating.

Naturally I still regularly meet with people who helped to organise it. We still sometimes talk about the conference: it was an unfor-



gettable time when we were challenged to prove ourselves. But to me, the most important achievement is that we are still friends after all these years.

There is another interesting picture among my slides: I am standing next to a big car bearing the sign WONCAEUROPE. This picture was taken the day after the conference; the car is not mine but one we rented to transport important guests to and from the airport. Since we could keep the cars for one day, I took this opportunity to chauffeur my family on a short trip in a big car we ourselves would never be able to afford. This was merely a small gesture of gratitude I could make for all the time I had to spend away from home working for the conference. In this picture I look relaxed and happy, and not worried at all.

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