

Igor Švab

Take home message from the president of Wonca Europe



At the closing ceremony of the Wonca Europe conference 2009 in Basel, the president of Wonca Europe, Professor Igor Švab, looked back to the conference and forward to the future.

Modern medicine tries to simplify

You get ill. You go to a doctor. You are examined. You receive treatment. You get well. Modern medicine strives to be a world of ultimate certainty, where everything can be measured and everything can be explained and controlled. Medicine is seen as a production of services and procedures aimed at maximising "outputs" (e.g., reduced mortality) and minimising costs, where patients are objects with diseases.

Complexity of family medicine

Family medicine has always tried to treat the person as well as the disease, within the context of their own home, their family and their community. Despite its patina of science, at its core family medicine is not about certainties. To the disappointment of the "techno-doctors", it is also about doubt, ambiguity, it is about the limits of the human expertise. You never quite know who or what will walk through your door next.

To perform this complex task family medicine uses the techniques of clinical, diagnostic and therapeutic reasoning, communicating by listening and understanding, explaining and advising as well as caring by continuous involvement and empathy.

Diagnostic and therapeutic reasoning

The essence of clinical reasoning has been described by Hippocrates: "Correct is to recognize what diseases are and whence they come; which are long and which are short; which are mortal and which are not; which are in the process of changing into others; which are increasing and which are diminishing; which are major and which are minor; to treat the diseases that can be treated, but to recognize the ones that cannot be, and to know why they cannot be; by treating patients with the former, to give them the benefit of treatment as far as it is possible". Nothing much has changed since then.

Communicating

Communication between people is a universal skill, that has been beautifully described by Marcel Proust in Swann's world: "Among the crowd of gestures and speeches and other little incidents which go to make up a conversation, it is inevitable that we should pass (without noticing anything that arouses our interest) by those that hide a truth for which our suspicions are blindly searching, whereas we stop to examine others beneath which nothing lies concealed". Communication between the doctor and the patient has the same challenges and problems.

Caring

Caring for a person that is close to you is something that is familiar to children as well, as it is demonstrated by a quote from Charlie Brown, who says to Snoopy: "Have you been lying awake worrying? Don't worry ... I'm here. The flood waters will recede, the famine will end, the sun will shine tomorrow, and I will always be here to take care of you". We try to be caring for our patients, with whom we often develop a personal relationship.

Brain and heart

The brain and heart are the main tools of family medicine. Unfortunately, in the era of technical medicine, these tools are not valued as important.

Nevertheless, family medicine is very effective, as has been shown by Macinko and al¹ in 2003. In 1970, in 18 OECD countries premature mortality was lower in 'high primary care' than in 'low primary care' countries. And in 2000 the gap was even broader, in favour of primary care.

What makes the difference?

The question is: "why are we so successful?" We can try to find the explanation to this: because family medicine is cheap, simple, easy or because of its high productivity?

But there may be another explanation. What if this effect is because of the added value of the "practical complexity" we routinely use, because of our somehow unique expertise, which is often not recognised and is still poorly understood?

Conclusion

Family medicine is not just another industry. It is a caring profession that uses science as a tool. It has specific techniques, suitable for the complex situations it encounters. It uses the most sophisticated tool of all: the human person.

Take home message

Take care of your patients, because when you care, it makes all the difference.

And take care of yourselves, because when you are tired or ill, you cannot care.

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¹ Macinko et al, Health Serv Res. 2003;38:831-65.