

Postgraduate education for general practice/family medicine in Europe

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Vocational Training/Specific Training for general practice/family medicine is happening all over Europe. The training activities have been imposed on some countries and have been met with enthusiasm in other countries - but are consequences of rules for training of general practitioners laid down by the European Commission as conditions for general practitioners wanting to practise in any of the European countries. The current situation of general practice education is best characterised by words such as: multiform, multifactorial, multilateral, multiplied, multistaged, etc. Despite all the diversity in organisation of health care, structure of health systems, tradition, workload, tasks, money and so on, general practice education is changing and advancing in quality and quantity along the same lines in the majority of European nations.

European Directive 93/16/EEC is still in force

The European directive still in force is EU directive 93/16/EEC of April 5th 1993. This states that the education for general practice to be at least 2 years of clinical training in hospital and general practice, at least 1 year in general practice (clinics), and a theoretical course of "an appropriate number of hours". Professional bodies, especially UEMO, have made efforts to enhance general practice training, putting forward proposals based on the UEMO Consensus Document Copenhagen 1994 stating a training period of minimum 3 years, training in general practice of 1.5 years, a theoretical course of 100 hours per year, and general practitioners in charge of all educational elements thus ensuring general practice orientation throughout the entire education.

The proposals from the UEMO consensus conference were approved by the ACMT (Advisory Committee on Medical Training) for the Commission; the Commission also approved the recommendations - but only on a consultative status and is not intending to produce any legislation in order to facilitate implementation of the recommendations. A standstill prevails and the profession is frustrated at the moment.

But what is the situation in European reality 1999?

Postgraduate general practice education in Europe as of March 1999 is enjoying development, based on information obtained from EURACT Council members by a questionnaire. All 29 EURACT Council members representing 29 European nations responded.

None of the 29 nations has a training period less than two years; in fact two thirds reported a total training period of 3 years or more. The training period spent in general practice is 6 months or less in 1/3 of nations (2 nations have no defined training in general practice at all), in another 1/3 of nations is about 12 months, and in the remainder range from 18 to 48 months. Thus the composition of the training period is still dominated by hospital based training in most nations, and in 50% of nations general practice trainees spend 24 months or more inside hospitals.

Prior to entering the training programme trainees complete an internship of 12-18 months; but internship continues to be a confusing matter: in some nations it is part of the pregraduate and in others the postgraduate the programme, and 3 nations include internship in the specific training period.

An educational programme is present in 18 and is obligatory in 16 of 29 nations. A theoretical course is included in the training in all nations but one. Training in research is included in 16 nations, and in quality development in 19 nations of 29, the remaining nations are considering incorporating these items in training programmes.

In as many as 23 of the 29 nations an examination is performed on completion of training. In 28 nations general practice is a recognised specialty.

Changes in specific training are being discussed in 24, planned in 21 and implemented in 19 nations of 29. The changes are concerned with more training time in general practice and quality development of all elements of the training process

Total training time is 36 months or more in 2/3 of countries and training time in general practice 18 months or more in 1/3 of them. Hospital training time is still occupying at least 50% of total training time. Half the countries provide a theoretical course of more than 100 hours per (training) year, stimulating academic development of general practice.

Conclusion:

In broad terms European general practice is moving along the right lines, enhancing training time, and at the same time promoting the relevance and quality of training by getting control over more and more of the training period. Profession profile development is clearly observable in most individual countries, but reluctance prevails in the higher political administrative levels; wondering why is beyond the scope of this report of *status presens* - but the word resources (meaning issues round money, time and service) might be worthwhile to explore.