Re: Wonca Europe 2023 Definition of General Practice/Family Medicine: New Needs, New Content

To the Editor:

In the latest issue, Nikolaos Nikitidis[1] presented WONCA Europe's 2023 definition for General Practice/Family Medicine.[2] It builds on WONCA's founding name (*World Organization of National Colleges, Academies, and Academic Associations of General Practitioners/Family Physicians*), previous definitions of the field, and considers emerging needs and contents (eg, Health and Sustainability).[3–6] However, by framing our discipline as General Practice/Family Medicine, all definitions fail to recognize that in most parts of the world, physicians graduating from medical schools practice medicine as general physicians without additional postgraduate training.[7–9] This is the case in most countries in Asia, Latin America, some European countries, India, South Africa, etc. In these countries, general physicians provide the bulk of primary care services and could pursue Family Medicine training if they desire to advance their professional skills, but is not required to provide clinical services in primary care. This lack of distinction between general practice without postgraduate training and the practice of family medicine, which includes residency or additional training and certification after medical school graduation, creates confusion and is troublesome to our field. In these contexts, patients, researchers, decision-makers, and other health care professionals, including physician colleagues, frequently fail to recognize the added value of family medicine training, despite evidence that patients receiving care at health care centers with a greater number of family physicians achieve better health (eg, improved chronic disease indicators, higher immunization rates, and enhanced maternal and child health indicators) and have greater satisfaction compared with patients seen at health care centers with only general practitioners.[10,11]

Research in this area is limited because the countries producing most published primary care research (United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada)[12,13] require additional training to practice medicine and, therefore, do not have general and family physicians coexisting in their primary care workforce.[6,7] Physicians without additional postgraduate training should not have the same knowledge and skills as family physicians who complete a postgraduate residency or a supervised internship, and therefore, should be treated as a different type of primary care clinician. Even though family physicians are generalists,[14] not all generalists are family physicians. Clarifying the difference in knowledge, skills, roles, and outcomes between general and family physicians is essential to the future of our discipline, and a future professional definition of our discipline should clarify them.

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Response: Re: Wonca Europe 2023 Definition of General Practice/Family Medicine: New Needs, New Content

In a recent letter, Garcia-Huidobro, Prasad, and von Pressentin emphasized the distinction between General Practice and Family Medicine.[1] According to them, general practitioners are primary care physicians who have completed medical school but have not pursued additional specialized training. In contrast, family physicians undergo further training and earn certification through residency programs or supervised internships. The terminology varies in my country and possibly in other European countries, which contributes to the confusion.

In Greece, physicians are categorized into 2 groups: those without a specialty (medical school graduates without further training, a small minority) and specialists (the vast majority). Although it may seem unusual to some, General Practice is officially recognized as a medical specialty. Canada's experiencing something similar,[2] I think. Medical school graduates must complete a 5-year residency program to qualify as general practitioners. Due to their extensive training, general practitioners possess greater knowledge and skills than doctors without a specialty, justifying their classification as specialists. While doctors without a specialty can practice primary care, they do so with lower salaries and certain restrictions.

Further complicating the issue, the term "Family Doctor" refers to a role within the health care system rather than a specifically trained physician. It simply designates a doctor responsible for family care, regardless of his formal education. Due to a shortage of full trained general practitioners, the government is considering allowing physicians from other specialties, such as internists, to serve as family doctors after completing a short training program. It is known that there are substantial variations in the practice of family medicine across various European regions.[3] We have to add that even the terminology used varies considerably. A valuable pursuit would be to explore how other countries define and use the terms "general practice" and "family medicine."

Doctors without specialization, fully trained general practitioners (family physicians according to authors terminology), and occasionally specialists from other fields all contribute to family care, but they differ in knowledge,[4] skills, approaches,[5] and outcomes.[4] The authors suggest revising the discipline's definition to clarify these differences, emphasizing the benefits of additional training of physicians, though this may lead to negative consequences like interprofessional conflicts.[6] The proposal's potential benefits, risks and the implementation approach require careful consideration.

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