

Wonca – where have we come from?

David A GAME

Wonca was officially established at the time of the Fifth World Conference of General Practice in Melbourne, Australia in 1972.

Actually, not only was the organization born on this occasion, but also the acronym, WONCA. It was Monty Kent-Hughes, the Chairman of the Conference Organizing Committee, who suggested this name during one of the many planning meetings. No one took him seriously. Everyone just laughed. None of us, including Monty himself, ever thought it would catch on. But despite many suggestions that it must be changed, it has persisted. Council at its meeting in Durban in May 2001 finally agreed that it was too well known to change and, in fact, should now be revered by ceasing to be an acronym, but should be a name in its own right. So now the organization is officially known by the word, not the acronym, WONCA.

The fact that 1972 was the Fifth World Conference implies that there were earlier meetings. Obviously there were four – Montreal 1964, Salzburg 1966, New Delhi 1968 and Chicago 1970. These were under the aegis of an interim World Council which debated the possibility of a permanent organization. The final decision to proceed was made in Chicago and the process for formal inauguration in Melbourne in 1972 was commenced. Between Chicago and Melbourne such things as a constitution, financial arrangements and secretariat sites were debated by correspondence. Judging from the long and at times acrimonious debates at the inaugural council meeting in Melbourne one wonders, as a participant, what difference this preparatory debate had on the final outcome.

Membership grew from 13 countries at the beginning of the Melbourne conference – four more were accepted during the inaugural Assembly to the current membership of 57 Member Organizations, eight Associate Member Organizations and five Organizations in Collaborative Relations with Wonca.

Growth was not rapid. Initially there was much scepticism – even among some of the major founder

nations including the UK, Canada, USA and Australia. There were always dedicated individuals who espoused Wonca, and had the foresight to see its future influence on the international scene, but College/Academy Councils were not so keen. Fortunately with persistence this foresight has been rewarded; Wonca's influence on the international scene in the realm of health care delivery is now fully accepted and respected.

One of the great assets of the organization has been the stability of the secretariat. Initially there was a strong feeling that it should rotate every 2 or 3 years to the office of the host organization of the next world meeting. The alternative view of a permanent secretariat prevailed.

Up to June 2001 the secretariat has always been in Australia. With the appointment of Dr Alfred Loh as CEO, the office has moved now to Singapore. Dr David Game, the first Honorary Secretary/Treasurer (the role now replaced by the CEO) started the first office in a very modest manner – in fact a desk in his own dressing room. It remained in his house until Professor Wes Fabb took over the role of Honorary Secretary/Treasurer and then CEO in 1980. Except for 4 years while he was at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Prof. Fabb has maintained the office in Melbourne. From its very modest beginnings the secretariat has now become a highly sophisticated, very busy and very efficient office.

To some, it must be admitted, Wonca simply relates to world meetings, every 2 or now every 3 years. These certainly have been the flagship of the organization and have played a very large part in bringing it before the world forum. To be selected as the host of one of these meetings is now a very keenly contested affair.

However, the real business goes on through the work of the Executive, which has the management control between the three-yearly Council meetings, together with the work of the committees and working parties, etc., and very significantly through the activities of the regions.

The concept of regions really grew out of the then existing Combined Colleges meetings in the Asia Pacific area. They are now firmly established not only in the Asia Pacific region but also in the Americas, Europe, Africa, Middle East and South Asia. They are

Correspondence: Dr David Game, 50 Lambert Road, Royston Park, South Australia, 5070 Australia.
Email: dgame@health.on.net

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semiautonomous with their own bylaws and their own Vice Presidents who are also members of the Executive Committee of Wonca. With the recent decision of the individual members of the Iberoamerican Confederation of Family Medicine (currently an Organization in Collaborative Relations with Wonca) to seek membership of Wonca, there is every prospect of a new South America region and then Wonca will embrace the world.

Increasing relationship and cooperation with the World Health Organization (WHO) has been very significant. Initially rather eschewed by WHO, the current joint activities demonstrate what can be achieved by working together to attain common goals. In 1998 a joint report prepared by WHO and Wonca entitled 'Making Medical Practice and Education More

Relevant to the People's Needs: The Contribution of the Family Doctor' has been widely distributed and accepted. 'Improving Health Systems: The Contribution of Family Medicine – A Guide Book' is very near completion. This is designed to assist those countries who are planning to introduce family medicine into their health care systems or aiming to improve existing systems.

The past has been interesting and productive through the dedication and foresight of many family doctors. The future looks very bright and the prospects for future growth, significance and influence abound.

David A GAME AO KSJ
Past Hon Secretary/Treasurer
Past President
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