

GENERAL PRACTICE

And the general practitioner

General practice can be defined as the medical discipline which provides community-based, continuing, comprehensive, preventive primary-care, in a personalised manner to patients of all ages and gender, and to their families, regardless of the presence of disease or the nature of the presenting complaint. It is the speciality that integrates the biological, clinical and behavioural sciences in patient care.

The *general practitioner* or also known as the family physician is a physician who is educated and trained in the discipline of family medicine. He possesses the unique attitudes, skills and knowledge that qualifies him to provide continuing and comprehensive medical care, health maintenance, and preventive services to each member of the family regardless of sex, age or type of problem be it biological, behavioural or social.

In brief, a general practitioner functions as a generalist who accepts everyone seeking care; whilst other health providers limit access to their services on the basis of age, sex, or diagnosis.

General practice encompasses the following functions:

1. It is the *first-contact care*, serving as a point-of-entry for patients into the health care service.
2. It includes *continuity* by virtue of caring for patients in sickness and in health over some period of time.
3. It is *comprehensive care*, drawing from all the traditional major disciplines for its functional content.
4. It serves a *coordinative* function for all health care needs of the patient.
5. It assumes *continuing responsibility* for individual patient follow-up and community health care.
6. It is a *highly personalised* type of care.

General practitioners are also characterised by their disciplines which are:

Person centeredness or personalized care: general practitioners understand that health, illness and disease are personal experiences and their role is to relieve personal disease in the manner best suited to each individual.

Continuity of care or continuing responsibility: general practitioners commitment to patient does not cease at the end of illness but is a continuing responsibility, regardless of the patient's state of health or the disease process. There is no end point of treatment because a problem may recur at any time. This longitudinal care evolves into a strong bond between doctor and patient characterised by knowledge, understanding and trust.

Comprehensive care: the term comprehensive medical care spans the entire spectrum of medicine. Therefore the general practitioner must be trained comprehensively to acquire all the medical skills necessary to care for most problems. The general practitioner must be aware of the variety and complexity of skills and facilities available and match these to the individual's specific needs, giving full consideration to the patient's personality and expectations.

Whole person care: the general practitioner functions as a physician, counsellor, and advocate for individuals, families and their communities by the deep understanding of the whole person and the ability to manage complex conditions and circumstances appreciating the interplay between bio-psycho-social contributors to health.

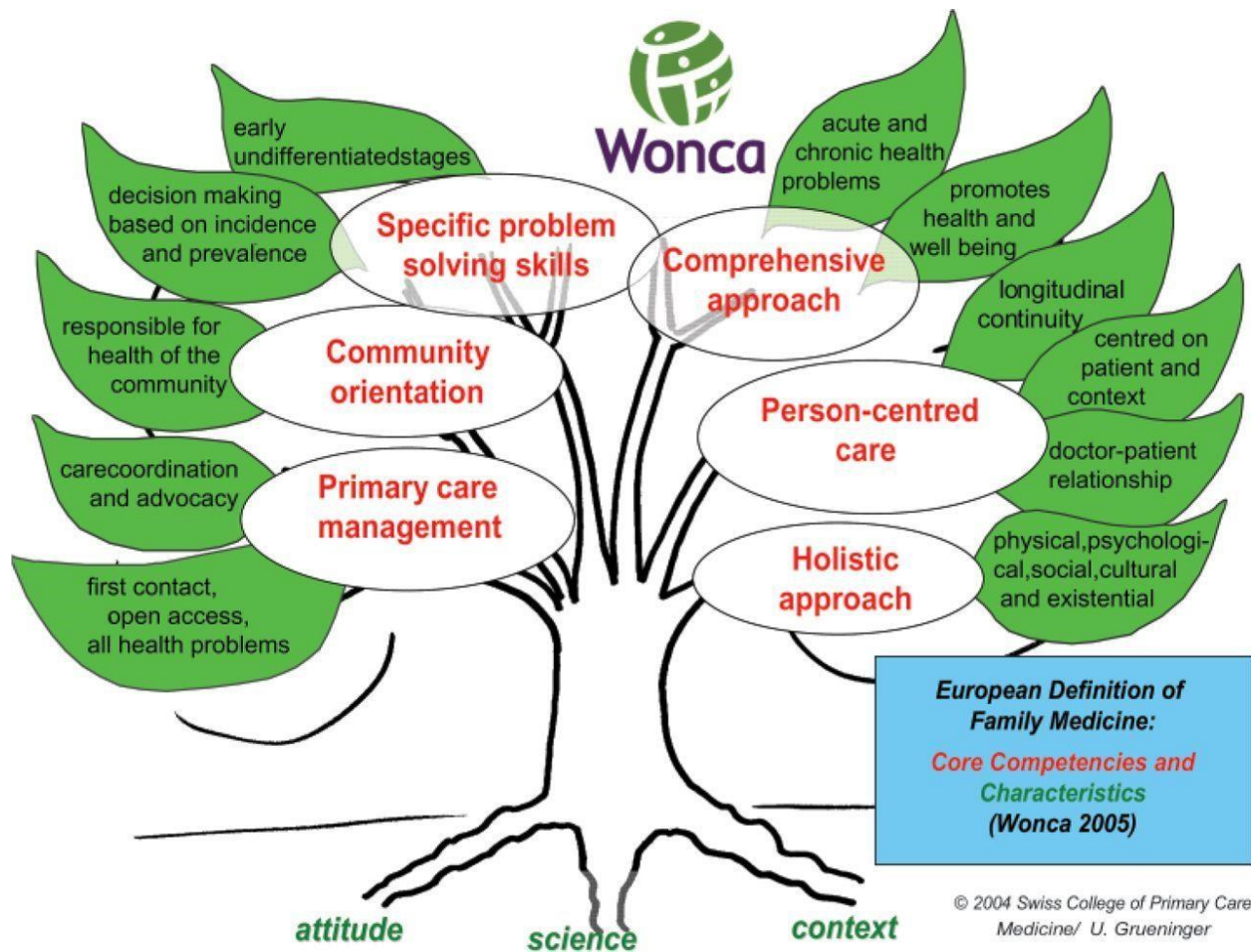
Diagnostic skills: the general practitioner must be an outstanding diagnostician because problems are seen in their early undifferentiated state and without the degree of resolution that is usually present by the time the patient is referred to consulting specialist. This is a unique feature of general practice because symptoms seen at this stage are often vague and non-descriptive.

Coordinator: the general practitioner is the best prepared to select specialist whose skills can be applied most appropriately to a given case taking into account the patient's needs and expectations. The general practitioner having establish a strong rapport with his patient and family and having knowledge of the patient's background, personality and fears, is best able to select and coordinate the activities of appropriate individuals from the large variety of medical disciplines in planning the patient's care.

A general practitioner must assess their professional capabilities, expand existing skills and acquire new skills over a professional lifetime. This can be done through involvement in continuing medical education/ continuing professional development, teaching, mentorship, and research.

General practice is a unique discipline and it is not merely the summation of specialities practiced at a superficial level. In the current climate where medicine is often fragmented by specialization and sub-specialization, there is greater than ever need for the generalist. The patient requires a trusted focal point and who can better fit this role than the caring family doctor.

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