
Health gatekeepers : Family medicine gains popularity in Armenia

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This week Lilit Mesropanyan visited policlinic N17 to get a prescription for her 1 year old ailing grandchild. Physician Paytsar Urganjyan while writing the prescription asked about the rest of Mesropanyan's family members. She remembers all members by names, knows their ages as well as aware of their health problems.

For 5 years Mesropanyan's family has been applying to one doctor, regardless of problems. The former pediatrician Urganjyan who had been treating the Mesropanyan family for over 25 years is now a family doctor. She is one of 1,000 physicians who practice family medicine throughout Armenia. Family medicine was launched in Armenia in 1999 as a part of state strategy of increasing the effectiveness of primary health care. Family practice chairs were established at the Yerevan State Medical University, National Institute of Health and Basic Medical College which train nurses.

The experts say that the Soviet system of health provision was inefficient mostly because of the dependence of the system on specialized physicians. The new system introduced doctors whose general knowledge allows them to treat a variety of problems for all ages. The citizens can voluntarily choose a family doctor or specialists.

"Family medicine is a necessary component of primary modern medicine," says Urganjyan. "The family physician is the first diagnostician for the whole family and the success of treatment provided by family doctor is undoubted. When a physician knows well the medical history of a family as well as their social life style it makes it easier to prevent the occurrence of health problems."

The physicians who wish to be trained as family doctors should necessarily have higher medical education in specialty of therapist or pediatrician. They can apply to one of the two clinical chairs for one year courses of family medicine. The courses are financed by the World Bank which allocated \$1 million for training of doctors and nurses as well as for furnishing of family physicians offices.

At first the proposed system raised some discontent among specialists like obstetricians who concluded that sharing the domain with family doctors will deprive them of clients. However the health officials assure that specialists will stay in demand as family medicine practitioners should work in team with specialists and refer the patient to them in case of special disorders. "People should understand that family doctor does not pretend to be all-knowing and family medicine is not a one-doctor sphere," says Urganjyan. "From the other side before getting the diploma of pediatrician or therapist students spent 6 years studying general medicine which includes a wide range of specialties from traumatology to psychiatry. With the proposed courses for family medicine doctors acquire enough knowledge to cope with primary diagnostic and treatment."

Still the introduction of the new system will be followed by some reforms. It is planned to reduce the number of policlinics by uniting the infant policlinics with units dealing with women's consultation. Now the primary medicine is represented in policlinics by family doctors, nurses and the team

of traditional specialties like therapists, obstetrician, gynecologists, ophthalmologists and others. The population has an opportunity to choose their primary care physician based on a new mechanism for open population enrollment. Posters in polyclinics show the dossiers of the family doctors to give a chance to visitors to acquaint themselves with all doctors.

"Annually some 150 practicing physicians apply to the clinical residency of University to get the specialty of family doctor," says Mikayel Narimanyan, the head of Family Medicine Department of the Yerevan State Medical University. "Also students after graduating from the Medical University could apply for a 2 year faculty of Family medicine. (Currently 52 students study the family medicine) During the study the doctors acquire knowledge of some 10 basic directions of primary medicine."

"The introduction of family medicine is of great importance especially in rural areas, where doctors factually work as family doctors because of the lack of polyclinics and narrow specialists."

"We should follow the model samples of successful family medicine system, like the one in Great Britain or in Scandinavian countries. By now I think the family medicine in Armenia proved to be vital as more people apply for having a family doctor."

Sergey Khachatryan, the head of the office for the realization of the health programs says that by 2012 all Armenian citizens will have chance to have family medicine's physicians. By 2009 another 1270 doctors and 1000 nurses will get the certificate of family medicine specialists. For the education of one family doctor is allocated \$1270 and \$630 is allocated for the training of nurses.

The practicing family doctors say that the new practice allow them to better apply the knowledge they got during the studying medicine. The only concern of family doctors is the system of payment. (Free for patient) the salary of a family doctor depends on the number of his patients. Family doctors who provide service from 500-1000 both children and adult get 64 dram (20 cents) per child and 32 per adult.