

Seeking united voice for general practice

“We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately”

This quote from Benjamin Franklin concluded my address at the IPAC Conference, October 2006.

IPAC’s commitment to general practice unity predates this conference. However, our focus has intensified in recent months. General practice unity, through united leadership and a single voice, has become a top IPAC priority.

Currently we have five or more national organisations, and the General Practice Leaders Forum, supporting general practice and organised general practice. Practice teams are supported by a number of voices, not always perfectly aligned, and not clearly mandated by general practice as a whole.

Our prime objective is to strengthen general practice through a single clear united voice, whatever the politics of the day. That is not to say that existing organisations would or should disappear, because some have wider roles, and clear international identities and connections.

However there is considerable scope for consolidating the operational aspects of these organisations through a single entity, to avoid duplication and share services. Through this economy of scale, we believe a comprehensive range of services for general practice can be provided in a more cost effective way. Ultimately this may occur through a single subscription to support all national general practice activities. Where there are specific sub-groups within general practice, who need strong support from their colleagues, their alignment with a national organisation can add this weight.

A strategic governance structure for general practice is a natural home for the fledgling Strategy for General Practice, and QI4GP, (the quality and information strategy for general practice). General practice can be much clearer about its longer term objectives and direction.

A single national organisation can ensure the delivery of services to general practice through a single series of local networks. Practice teams need a local face for their national organisation, if the organisation is to remain relevant to those delivering care at the coalface. History has shown us that it is very difficult, and not particularly effective, to maintain several functional networks in the same locality, all trying to serve the same members (eg IPA, College faculty, NZMA division).

This week a GP registrar described to me how his peers felt disengaged from general practice leadership because they are not sure where to go, who or how they should connect to, and significantly, how it all works. They lack a sense of

belonging to and being clearly supported by, the wider family of general practice, having just emerged from under the protective umbrella of the RDA.

They understand their educational pathway, and CME. But political lobbying and advocacy, changing business and employment models within general practice, IPAs and PHOs, the future of general practice, are all foreign and somewhat bewildering. They want to align with their new wider world, but are unsure how, or with whom. A national general practice organisation should be a visible flagship, and embrace and support new recruits to our profession, be they GPs, practice nurses, managers, or others who identify with the practice team.

Many PHOs have a good supportive relationship with their practices, but have much wider responsibilities than general practice. A national general practice organisation should have a clear relationship with national PHO organisations, reflecting relationships at local level.

Any profession working within the PHO environment needs to have a strong national professional voice, for its own effectiveness. Vibrant general practice working alongside other provider groups and communities is key to effective PHOs. Come the day when pharmacists, physiotherapists or others are funded through PHOs, they too will almost certainly want their own strong professional voice within the PHO framework.

So what are we doing about it? We are responding to general practice feedback.

The role of IPAC is to support organised general practice by responding to the needs of our members, and “to clear the national pathway” so members can perform well in supporting general practice.

Last week we sent a letter to IPAC affiliated general practices via our member IPAs and PHOs. This follows the IPAC survey, and the recent IPAC Members’ Forum which both strongly supported a single national organisation to support general practice.

We are about to embark on visits to our members and their practices throughout much of the country to receive further feedback, and share ideas with general practice colleagues.

Alongside this we will be having discussions with our colleagues in other national organisations, as we invite and encourage them to join with us in meeting this challenge, for the benefit of general practice.

Fonterra chiefs reminded us at IPAC 06 that unless any organisation is constantly reinventing itself, it inevitably falls behind, becomes less effective, and ultimately irrelevant. General practice deserves the best. We need your support.