

Stronger Together: Charting the Course to Navigate the Future

Claire Thomas

“Our movement is a catalyst for future leadership in family medicine”

VdGM president Claire Thomas assures this WONCA Europa network wants to help future family medicine leaderships to grow and contribute to the advent – in the not very distant horizon – of a new generation of exemplary family doctors. Therefore, it insists on supporting colleagues from less fortunate communities, even going so far as sponsoring their attendance at events like the 5th Vasco da Gama Movement Forum. Focusing on the event that will take place in Porto, Claire Thomas applauds the local organising team’s inventive approach and believes this will be a moment to share and remember.

The VdGM Forum will be organized for the fifth time in Porto, early next year. What are, in your opinion, the main challenges the organization faces, to make this a memorable edition?

Having attended each of the five VdGM Forums to date I can attest to the motivational energy and passion they have ignited in our membership. This is a hard act to follow, however we are lucky to have a dynamic committee of young Portuguese doctors leading on the development of the 5th Vasco da Gama Movement Forum. The team, led by Ana Nunes Barata, have been thinking outside the box about how to make this edition unique. The “unconference” sessions planned by the Portuguese Host Organising Committee will bring a creative and innovative spark to the event, challenging abstracts to think outside the box and apply alternative facilitation techniques beyond the usual conference fare. I am very excited to see this in action and applaud the team for their inventive and modern approach to putting this program together.

The motto chosen for the Forum is “Stronger together: charting the course to navigate the future”. Are European General Practice/Family Medicine residents and young family doctors that close, when it comes to expectations, interests and concerns? Is diversity a problem or an opportunity for VdGM?

Diversity is what the Vasco da Gama Movement is all about! Through exchanges and events we have evolved a strong culture of intercultural learning, sharing and networking. We embrace the diversity seen across Europe as an opportunity for both personal and professional growth. Despite our diversity, we all face many familiar challenges; advancing technology, ageing populations, complex comorbidities, balancing the evidence base with holistic needs of the individual and increasing public expectations to name but a few. The temptation to focus inwards is powerful, reflected by the rise of nationalist behaviours and philosophies. In Vasco da Gama we believe that it is only by looking outwards, beyond our immediate sphere of experience that we can achieve the paradigm shift necessary to drive progressive change and development. We see diversity not only as a strength but as absolutely vital to building the future of our profession and societies.

Traditionally, the VdGM Forums are organized in a low cost format and without substantial support from pharmaceutical and medical devices companies. Does that allow you to address the real issues that matter to young family doctors/residents in Europe?

By avoiding the inherent bias that is a widely proven consequence of accepting funding from pharmaceutical companies, enables us to confidently deliver relevant content free from external influences. It is of course no easy task to deliver high quality events that remain financially accessible to our membership. In order to improve our scientific quality whilst maintaining the values at the heart of our organisation we have developed the new Executive role of Events Officer. The mandate for this role is to not only offer support to Hosts and improve communication pathways. The Events Officer will be focusing on the quality of the events we deliver; evaluating past events to identify learning opportunities and developing tools and resources to support hosts in delivering excellent scientific programs. Quality does not cost the earth, but integrity is priceless.

The Movement seems to take social responsibility very seriously, so much so that colleagues from more fortunate parts of Europe can cover the registration fee of a named delegate to the Forum, therefore supporting economically disadvantaged participants. Is this a reflection of the overall VdGM spirit?

The VdGM spirit is hard to define, so much so that it is often referred to as the “VdGM Virus”: an infectious energy that passes from one member to the next. Although intangible, one could say that it combines a passion for our profession with an openness to diversity and learning. If we are not widening access to those less financially secure then we are not truly achieving diversity and we will miss many opportunities for learning and growth. Inclusiveness is important to us, reflected not only in the opportunity for members to support other members in attending. We have for several years now, initiated by one of our former Presidents Sven Streit, a fund which we use to sponsor 2 young doctors to attend each of our events. This fund is intended to help those who might otherwise struggle to attend, to join our family and hopefully spark further growth and change in their own countries upon their return. Our movement is a catalyst for future leadership in family medicine and it is vital that we can provide this opportunity to those who will benefit from it most, not only those with means.

You have just recently been elected VdGM president, a movement that has grown rapidly in recent years and is now a consolidated structure within WONCA Europe. How do you see the potential development (in terms of geographic expansion, strategy and lobbying) of this network in the near future?

Vasco da Gama Movement has expanded rapidly, as you say, outgrowing its initial skin. We are in the process of shedding that skin to see what wonders lie beneath. This means strategic review and ultimately, change. Since beginning my term of office in January 2017, we have been looking at our structure and function, revising our constitution and strengthening our internal and external relationships in order to adapt to meet the challenges and opportunities that face us now and in the future. Particularly exciting is a return to our core aims and objectives, evaluating where we are achieving them and where efforts are wasted. This has led to the development of a new Executive role for Policy. Using our vast network of members, we will be gathering their ideas and opinions to formulate policy papers and truly advocate for the voice of young family doctors within WONCA and beyond. It is an honour to facilitate our network through this phase of organisational development, and I am blessed with an Executive Group and Council who are passionate and engaged. I look forward to the possibilities of what we can achieve together for our network, our members, our profession and ultimately our patients.



According to Claire Thomas, VdGM is currently going through a period of reflection and change, that will bring the Movement closer to its founding principles.



*Stronger Together: Charting the Course to Navigate the Future***Vasco da Gama Movement
Report on the IV Forum of the Vasco da Gama
Movement in Strasbourg**

The Vasco da Gama Movement (VdGM) is the network of WONCA Europe for residents and young family doctors who wish to share experiences and knowledge in General and Family Medicine (FM). This interaction emerges from the working groups within the VdGM, the international exchanges and at special events such as pre-conferences and forums. The VdGM Forum is held annually since 2014 and is open to all FM doctors. The IV Forum of the VdGM was held in the city of Strasbourg, France, on 21st and 22nd of April 2017 and brought together about 150 doctors of various nationalities.

Tiago Castanheiro chose to participate in the Forum to become familiar with some of the numerous VdGM projects, the primary health care system and the residency programme of our French colleagues. What initially was a dip in the unknown, quickly became an overwhelming opportunity of sharing among European colleagues with so much in common. During the forum, there was one particularly interesting session, which consisted in the development and presentation of ideas to improve FM; this encouraged the interaction between colleagues, allowing for the exchange of doubts, criticisms and suggestions. He also highlights the workshop on leadership given by Dr. Claire-Marie Thomas, VdGM President, with insight on the development of soft skills, so important in the management of day-to-day clinical practice.

Sara Teotónio Dinis recalls the moment when doctors and patients walked through the city of Strasbourg and the session during which participants, inspired by a critical, positive, open, and captivating mind, imagined themselves to be flowers and bees in a discussion, making an analogy to the challenges of current FM.

Ana Beatriz Figueiredo believes that participation in the events promoted by the VdGM lead to personal and professional growth and the unique sharing aims at the constant development of our specialty.

In 2018, the V VdGM Forum will be held in Oporto on the 26th and 27th of January, so we invite all colleagues who want to join us to praise FM. However, we must warn you that any involvement in VdGM activities causes a contagious infection characterized by dependence and incessant search for knowledge.

"A stranger is just a friend you haven't met yet."



5th Vasco da Gama Movement Organising Committee at the 4th Vasco da Gama Movement Forum, in Strasbourg.



5th Vasco da Gama Movement Organising Committee at the WONCA Europe Conference 2017, in Prague.

