

Enriching the Geriatric Family Medicine Curriculum with Geriatric Mental Health Integration

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Key highlights:

- In 2022, the Royal College of Family Physicians of Thailand introduced a one-year training curriculum for the Certificate of Medical Proficiency in Geriatric Family Medicine.
- During their training, Geriatric Family Medicine trainees undertake a two-month rotation at the Division of Geriatric Psychiatry.
- The primary areas of emphasis within geriatric mental health include neurocognitive disorders and depression, along with addressing common mental illnesses often encountered in long-term care settings.

The Thai Board of Family Medicine and the Integration of Mental Health Practice

Family Medicine (FM) is a multidisciplinary field that emphasizes the delivery of continuous, comprehensive, coordinated, and context-specific primary healthcare to individuals, families, and communities. It encompasses biological, psychological, socio-economic, cultural, and spiritual dimensions and transcends limitations related to age, gender, organ system, or specific diseases. Graduates of FM residency training are referred to as family physicians, family doctors, or general practitioners.

In Thailand, the Thai Board of Family Medicine introduced a Diploma Program in 1999, building upon the foundation of the Diploma Program offered by the Thai Board of General Practice. Initially, there were five residency programs in family practice training, with nine trainees participating (Williams, Henley, Prueksaritanond & Aramrattana, 2002). As of 2022, the three-year Family Medicine curriculum established by the Royal College of Family Physicians of Thailand (RCFPT) includes two distinct types of training:

- Hospital-based: Trainees practice within university or provincial hospitals, with 35 such hospitals located across Thailand.
- Community-based: Trainees engage in practice within community hospitals (158 hospitals supervised by 37 provincial/university hospitals) and provincial/university hospitals (16 hospitals).

Within the hospital-based group, trainees undergo mental health care training during a rotation lasting 4 to 8 weeks in psychiatric units. Conversely, the community-based group involves eight sessions of community-based training, each lasting 3 hours. The curriculum encompasses subjects related to human behavior and addresses common mental health issues, including stress, anxiety, depression, suicide, and schizophrenia.

Advancements in Geriatric Family Medicine Training in Thailand

In 2022, the RCFPT developed the Training Curriculum for the Certificate of Medical Proficiency in Geriatric Family Medicine (RCFPT, 2022). This program was specifically designed to equip aspiring family physicians with the knowledge and expertise required to address the intricate healthcare needs of the elderly population. The primary objective of this curriculum is to facilitate the development of the following critical skills among trainees:

- Collaborating with general practitioners and specialists to address elderly patient care.
- Orchestrating coordinated care networks that bridge hospitals, homes, and communities.
- Efficiently managing available resources to benefit both patients and their families.
- Acquiring the essential knowledge and skills needed to meet the public health demands of healthcare teams and volunteers in Thailand.

- Instilling a commitment to lifelong learning.

The trainees for this program are family physicians who already hold a graduate diploma from the Thai Board of Family Medicine. Over the course of one year, they undergo rotations that encompass various aspects of geriatric care, including long-term care/intermediate care facilities (2 months), individual and community rehabilitation (2 months), palliative care and end-of-life care (1 month), geriatric psychiatry and neurology (2 months), and geriatric nutrition/vision/hearing issues (2 months), with an additional 3 months of elective rotations.

As of 2023, several training institutes have joined this initiative, including:

- Phramongkutklao Hospital, Bangkok
- Ramathibodi Hospital, Mahidol University, Bangkok
- Chiang Mai University (CMU), Chiang Mai Province
- King Chulalongkorn Memorial Hospital, Bangkok
- Rajavithi Hospital, Bangkok

These institutes collectively aim to recruit and train 12 residency trainees to further enhance geriatric family medicine in Thailand.

The Imperative of Geriatric Mental Health in Geriatric Family Medicine: Addressing the Challenges of an Aging Society in Thailand

As of 2021, Thailand has transitioned into an aging society, with 12.5 million individuals aged 60 or older, constituting 19% of the total population (Foundation of Thai Gerontology Research and Development Institute). According to a report by the World Health Organization, there is a high prevalence of mental health issues worldwide, with variations based on gender and age. Approximately one in eight individuals across the globe is affected by a mental disorder, with anxiety and depressive disorders being the most observed. Notably, schizophrenia stands out as the most expensive mental disorder in terms of per-person costs.

In response to this pressing need, the Geriatric Family Medicine curriculum has been enhanced to incorporate geriatric mental health. As part of this expanded curriculum, trainees now participate in a two-month rotation

program that includes geriatric psychiatry and neurology exposure. This training focuses on essential aspects of geriatric mental health, such as the management of neurocognitive disorders and depression. The primary objective of this rotation program is to equip trainees with practical experience in providing appropriate care for prevalent geriatric mental disorders, as well as common mental illnesses encountered in long-term care settings. Activities encompass ambulatory care, in-patient service working alongside geriatric psychiatrists and neurologists, mental healthcare provision in long-term care settings or nursing homes, and participation in academic pursuits, including interdisciplinary case conferences.

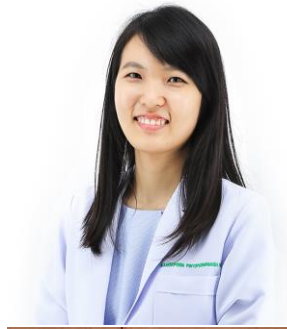
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