LEADERS: DR. MARK V. WILLIAMS

Helping Hospitalist Medicine Find Its Voice

As the first editor-in-chief of the Journal of Hospital Medicine, Dr. Mark V. Williams has played a key role in documenting the history of this new field.

In that role, he has watched hospital medicine grow and mature. The peer-reviewed journal, launched in January 2006, was once home to articles aimed at proving the value of adding hospitalists to an institution's roster. But now most articles focus on how to optimize care within the hospitalist model and how to more efficiently manage the hospital itself.

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"We have actually rejected articles in the recent past that were descriptions of the implementation of a hospitalist program," he said. "That's already been done."

Dr. Williams, chief of the division of hospital medicine at the Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine and Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago, is a former president of the Society of Hospital Medicine. In 1998, he established the first hospitalist program at a public hospital at Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta.

Despite his credentials, Dr. Williams said he was a little anxious about accepting the editor-in-chief job in 2005, not knowing what to expect. But his training in evidence-based medicine and the team of editors assembled by the Society of Hospital Medicine have made the job a lot of fun, he said.

The job has not been without challenges, he said, but not always the ones he anticipated. Dr. Williams said he was expecting to have trouble finding high-quality research articles to fill all the pages of a newly launched journal in a new field. It turned out that his biggest challenge has been sorting through the large volume of submissions and having to reject interesting articles. He and the rest of the staff have tried to address this by publishing more articles online, and in the future they hope to expand the number of issues and the number of pages.

The number of submissions shows that hospital medicine is maturing as a field, he said. "There has never been a journal focused on care delivery in the hospital, and yet this is where one-third of federal health care funding is expended."

The volume of high-quality research being conducted by hospitalists is likely to grow, Dr. Williams said, as academic institutions begin establishing divisions of hospital medicine and devoting research dollars to this area. For example, the Feinberg School of Medicine has just hired four hospitalists who will devote most of their time to research on hospital medicine. And many other physicians at the institution are involved in smaller research projects.

"It's this investment in hospital medicine research that's going to grow the entire field long term, demonstrating the importance of hospitalists in improving care delivery and quality improvement at hospitals," Dr. Williams said.

As for the journal, he sees his next big task as helping to prepare to hand over the reins to the next editor. He also hopes to see the journal become a monthly publication sometime in the next 2 years. But he's pleased with the progress so far. For instance, the journal was listed in Medline, the National Library of Medicine's bibliographic medical database, in its first year. And a recent measurement of the journal's most recent "impact factor" (how often it's cited by other journals) showed that it is gaining credibility within the research community.

"I've been surprised that we've achieved everything that we set out to do so fast," Dr. Williams said. ■

By Mary Ellen Schneider