New Research

Mentoring and Career Transition Needs of Senior Faculty in Family Medicine

To the Editor:
In 2008, 23% of the 4,810 members of the Society of Teachers of Family Medicine (STFM) were 55 years of age or older. We sought to identify the mentoring and career transition needs of senior faculty in family medicine, so we developed a Web-based questionnaire asking subjects about basic demographic information, leadership positions, retirement plans, career transition issues, career satisfaction, mentors, and other issues relevant to being a senior faculty member. We gained IRB approval, and STFM sent the survey electronically to all 1,108 STFM members who were over the age of 55.

One third of eligible subjects provided responses. Two thirds of respondents were males and one third females. Two thirds of respondents were employed in academic medical centers or university-based residency programs; the other third were employed primarily in community-based practices or hospitals. A majority of respondents had served in academic leadership positions, with a third having served as a clinic or program director and nearly a third having served as chair.

Retirement Plans
Fifty-five percent said that they had considered pursuing other options or a career transition during the previous year, and two thirds planned to retire by age 66, although the majority hoped to remain active in their profession after retirement.

Mentors
About half identified colleagues who had served as career mentors. While significantly more women reported having colleagues as career mentors than did men, women reported significantly more difficulty than men in finding mentors. Fifty-four percent of respondents reported that their most helpful mentors were colleagues at institutions different from their home institution or department.

Career Satisfaction
Forty-three percent of respondents reported some degree of career dissatisfaction; males employed in academic settings were significantly more likely to express a level of dissatisfaction compared to community-based male respondents.

Planning Issues
Respondents identified their most important planning issues as retirement and financial planning, finding a new direction or special “niche,” and balancing their career and life priorities. Their most significant needs were more time for family and personal activities, making a contribution to the profession, and mentoring the next generation. They expressed concerns about work-life balance in relation to the physical and mental limitations of age and identified concern about maintaining their clinical skills and keeping current.

Conclusions
As the age of family medicine academic faculty continues to increase, our discipline needs to examine its roles and professional needs. STFM should consider organized support programs that could benefit both senior academics and those who are moving into that career stage by continuing this intergenerational conversation that is part of the historical continuity of family medicine.

Acknowledgment: In memoriam for Jack Rodnick, MD, and Carole Bland, PhD.

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Rocking Chair and Empathy: A Pilot Study

To the Editor:
The undergraduate and graduate medical education professional organizations and medical education leaders advocate educational programs to enhance empathy among physicians in training.\(^1\)\(^2\) Enhancement of empathic skills is particularly important in graduate medical education where physicians in training begin caring for their patients without direct supervision.

Recent studies on changes in empathy during undergraduate and graduate medical education present a gloomy picture of erosion of empathy as trainees progress through medical training.\(^3\)\(^4\) This trend is especially critical for specialties that require sustained medical care and face-to-face patient-physician relationships such as family medicine.

The Rocking Chair Project (RCP), a nonprofit organization based in Woodbury, CT, was initiated in response to a need to enhance patient-physician relationships and empathic engagement in patient care in family medicine postgraduate training programs. In partnership with the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) Foundation and local family medicine residency programs, volunteer residents in the RCP are given the opportunity in the second year of their training to choose one of their indigent pregnant patients who is in the second trimester of pregnancy to receive the free gift of a glider rocking chair. Shortly after the baby is born, the chair