Lessons From the Past to Inspire Our Future

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(Fam Med 2011;43(1):5-6)

The first decade of the 21st century is over, and fair riddance to it. For most of the past 10 years, our country has been at war, our economy has been troubled, and our profession has spiraled downward into a state of dysfunction few of us would have dared to predict, even in our most pessimistic moments. Our discipline has been playing defense, trying to shore up declining student interest and struggling to prove the value of primary care, a concept that hardly requires more proof than was already available in 2000. In this issue of Family Medicine, we are publishing a paper about disaster planning, perhaps a metaphor for the state of our profession and our world.

The end of a decade often causes us to reflect on the past and look forward with hope for a better future. After half a century of struggle, health reform has been passed into law at the federal level, and many states are moving forward with measures to address long-needed reforms. It remains to be seen if these efforts will succeed where others have fallen short, but if ever we have needed a new start, it is now.

We are trying to transform our practices into Patient-centered Medical Homes, and we are trying to transform our educational programs into learning organizations to attract and serve the best and brightest young people. Thus, it seems fitting that we start the New Year, 2011, with a new look for our journal. With this new look, we renew our commitment to publishing the highest quality papers that will celebrate our successes and provide a beacon for the process of family medicine’s transformation. It will be left to the coming generation to carry this work forward, and they surely will need new and better tools than we have had in the past, tools that in some cases have not yet been invented.

There is one tool, however, that will never go out of style and that we will never have in sufficient supply: inspirational leadership. For our current generation of department chairs and residency directors, inspirational leadership often came from the papers and speeches of G. Gayle Stephens, MD. As we look to our future and transform the look of Family Medicine, what could be more appropriate than reflecting on the best our past has to offer?

It is possible that many of our faculty members and most family medicine residents and fellows are unfamiliar with Gayle’s work. So we are blessed by the festschrift offered to us in this issue by John Geyman, MD. Festschrift is a word derived from German and refers to a book or paper honoring the lifework of a respected scholar, published during his or her lifetime. The author of this wonderful paper is no less a treasure to us than his subject. Both men are giants in family medicine’s founding generation. The story of our discipline’s birth is usually told in political or sociological terms, but, from the start, ours is a discipline of reform based on ideas and principles. John reminds us that Gayle’s ideas are timeless, and the passion reflected in how John tells the story reveals much about why this is the case. Gayle never minces words or pulls punches. His criticism of medicine’s problems can be withering. But Gayle Stephens loves our profession, and his writing reminds us that family physicians are blessed by a public trust. For those unfamiliar with his work, I’d suggest you start with the published collections of his essays titled The Intellectual Basis of Family Lessons From the Past to Inspire Our Future
FROM THE EDITOR

Practice4 and Family Practice in the 1980s: a Second Decade of Essays.5

Publishing John’s review of Gayle’s work as we roll out a new format for our journal reminds us that turning a new page and starting a new chapter need not alter the plot or change the character of our story. We have always been about transforming American medicine, speaking out about injustice, and building a strong moral foundation for the next generation of family physicians. Some things change, and some things can never change. Read and enjoy.

References