

Guest Editorial

Everett Shocket, MD; and Daniel Kasprzyk, MD



VA Hospitals Should Become VA Medical Schools

The VA should encourage VA hospitals nationwide to step forward and develop their own medical schools. Such an action would benefit VA hospitals as well as American health care overall. A growing recognition exists of an imminent physician/nursing shortage. Any new medical school will help. No system could do it better than the VA and no system could do it so broadly.

The United States has an unacceptably low ratio of practicing primary care physicians to specialists.¹ This ratio is more balanced throughout most other western countries.² Within the VA, however, the ratio of primary care physicians to specialists is robust and stands as a goal for the nation. It could be a model for physicians in training.

The merits of electronic medical records are recognized by all; however, they seem to be difficult for practitioners to embrace. The federal government offers bonuses to private practitioners who commit to electronic medical records. Physicians trained within the VA quickly learn that electronic charting is the mother's milk of VA recordkeeping and ordering. No bonuses are needed.

VA facilities are clearly recognized by academic authorities as well able to train their students and residents, since so many medical schools have, for years, taken full advantage and sent their fledgling trainees to our VA hospitals for additional education. The medical students continue to pay heavy tuition to their medical schools

(not to the VA) and the residents earn a VA stipend. VA hospitals have been providing the training but have not been fully enjoying the potential returns.

CAN/SHOULD A HOSPITAL SPROUT A MEDICAL SCHOOL?

Although the majority of medical schools in this country burgeoned from expanding colleges or universities, some of our great self-standing hospitals have successfully initiated medical schools.

Examples are the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, which was founded in 1889 but opened its medical school in 1972,^{3,4} and Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City, which was founded in 1852 and opened its medical school in 1968.⁵ Most medical schools in London, England, were opened in the 1800s from old, established public hospitals. St. Bartholomew's Hospital was founded in 1123 and its medical college was established in 1843.^{6,7} The Royal Free Hospital was founded in 1828 and its medical school opened in 1877.^{8,9}

HOW COULD IT BE DONE?

The Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda, Maryland, trains 170 physicians each year. It is federally funded—there is no tuition. Each student is an officer in the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, or Public Health Services and indeed receives a military/government salary. Each commits to 7 years of government service upon graduating (and, thereafter, 6 years in a reserve status).¹⁰

VA facilities have their clinical staff already training students and residents at the bedside and in the operating room. The first 2 school years

of basic science would need new or expanded laboratory training facilities and basic science lecturers/teachers. New and interesting research projects might be forthcoming.

VA hospitals might well then attract a host of scholarly younger physicians who, in the past, have been uninterested in VA careers.

The VA could train its medical students at a modest or no tuition cost (per congressional directive) and would, of course, impose VA and/or other government service requirements (perhaps 10 years of service). Medical students, however, would not graduate, as they do now, with heavy indebtedness (often more than \$150,000) that understandably pushes their career planning toward high-paying specialties. Hopefully, many would choose to serve in the VA for a lifetime because they found it so fulfilling. Thus, the VA will have an ongoing cadre of dynamic computerized patient record system-literate physicians seeking new VA posts every year.

An emphasis would be placed on primary care.

SUMMARY

VA medical facilities have the buildings and the professional staff for meaningful medical school training. Already, many students and residents get a good part of their (university) training in VA facilities.

If properly financed, creating VA medical schools could help the United States overcome the threatening national physician/nursing shortage. Properly directed, it could rebalance the ratio of primary care to specialist physicians. It also would expand the numbers of physicians in the nation

Dr. Shocket is a physician at a VA community-based outpatient clinic. **Dr. Kasprzyk** is an internist at a VA medical center.

who are electronic medical record savvy and it would reduce VA physician turnover. A win-win situation. ●

Author disclosures

The authors report no actual or potential conflicts of interest with regard to this editorial.

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