

# Toward the Definition of Orthopedic Care in Family Practice

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It is common knowledge among many physicians, particularly those in the primary care disciplines, that orthopedic problems constitute a major part of everyday clinical practice. It is also recognized that "office orthopedics" makes up a substantial majority of orthopedic problems encountered in the population at large. Despite this general consensus, however, until recently there have been very few studies of the incidence and patterns of these problems in general medical practice. In addition, this important area has been relatively neglected for many years at both undergraduate and graduate levels of medical education.

Two papers in this issue of *The Journal* make significant progress toward better understanding of the spectrum of orthopedic problems encountered in general/family practice and toward clarifying the role of the family physician in the care of these problems.<sup>1,2</sup> This kind of understanding is essential for the development of more effective teaching programs and for assuring that the needs of the public are met for the care of these problems.

The major responsibility for the care of orthopedic problems is carried by two fields—general/family practice and orthopedic surgery. In a major study of the profile of the primary care specialties in the United States in the early 1970s, Mechanic showed that less than one half of surveyed pediatricians were involved in the care of simple fractures, while the proportion of general internists providing such care was less than six percent.<sup>3</sup> Approximately 80 percent of general practitioners in this study reported inclusion of fracture care in their practices.

The great majority of orthopedic problems seen

in primary care are nonsurgical. The principal focus of orthopedic surgery as a specialty is upon the major and more complicated musculoskeletal conditions and injuries requiring surgical intervention. It has been shown that orthopedists tend to equate greater involvement in the care of surgical problems with higher levels of practice satisfaction.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore incumbent upon family practice to accept major responsibility for the care of a wide range of orthopedic problems in everyday practice.

Two conditions are required to assure that the needs of patients with traumatic and non-traumatic musculoskeletal problems are effectively addressed: (1) reassessment and refinement of curricular content and strategies in family practice residencies to adequately cover this broad area; and (2) interspecialty cooperation between orthopedic surgery and family practice which could well include the development of an agreement along the lines of that concluded recently with the American College of Obstetrics-Gynecology.<sup>5</sup>

## References

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