

PA Geriatrics Society - Western Division: Maturing Gracefully

...by *Christina Morton*

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In September 1990 representatives from area hospitals dedicated to geriatric medicine met for the first time to discuss plans for creating an American Geriatrics Society affiliate for Western Pennsylvania and some surrounding areas. At the time, every hospital in the area had some type of geriatric program, and those physicians and health care professionals who were part of the programs wanted to work together in a collaborative fashion.

During the early stages of the planning process, representatives met with individuals across the state of Pennsylvania and in parts of West Virginia to determine what areas the society affiliate should represent. At the time a geriatric society affiliate already existed in the Delaware Valley area in eastern Pennsylvania. Between that society and a newly formed society, the two groups wanted to represent geriatricians across the entire state.

In October 1990, after meeting with representatives in Harrisburg, Lancaster and Hershey, an arbitrary line was drawn across the state of Pennsylvania to indicate what areas the newly formed geriatric society affiliate would include. This “line,” which still exists today, separates the eastern and western parts of the state. The western Pennsylvania division includes geriatricians all the way to Harrisburg and Hershey. Geriatricians located just west of Lancaster and the beyond are members of the Delaware Valley Geriatrics Society in the east.

In the early 1990s there was not a geriatric society in West Virginia either, but there were a few geriatricians in the northern part of that state who were also interested in joining a state affiliate. Therefore, the newly formed society initially began as the PA/WV Geriatrics Society. It was not until several years later when West Virginia created its own society affiliate that the Pennsylvania society became known as the PA Geriatrics Society—Western Division (WD).

The first meeting of the society’s Board of Directors took place on January 29, 1991. The board elected officers to serve until an official election could be held by the membership, including doctors Karen Powers, president; Fred Rubin, president-elect; and Judith Black, secretary/treasurer. The first membership meeting took place on February 21, 1991, with 23 individuals in attendance. During that membership meeting, bylaws, modeled after the American Geriatrics Society, created five committees within the society, including membership, education, legislative affairs, by-laws and nominating; these committees still remain as such today.



Dr. Rubin



Dr. Black

Did you know? In 1998, the Allegheny County Medical Society contracted to oversee administrative responsibilities for the PA/WV Geriatrics Society, a relationship that still exists today.

Mission and goals

The mission of the PA Geriatrics Society—WD has remained the same for more than 20 years. The society is “dedicated to improving the health and well-being of all older persons. It is a non-profit organization of physicians and other health care professionals committed to the provision of quality health care for older persons. As a regional affiliate of the American Geriatrics Society, the organization provides leadership for professionals, policy makers and the public in the area served. The organization aids in the efforts of the American Geriatrics Society in developing, implementing and advocating programs in patient care, research, professional education, public policy and public information for the Western Pennsylvania region.”

Did you know? Dr. Mark Beers was an invited guest speaker at the 1994 Clinical Update. He is nationally known for creating the Beers List (drugs that should not be used for the elderly). Dr. Beers died in 2009, but the most recent addition of the Beers List was published a few months ago.

In addition, the society's goals are to:

- Develop, support and promote the clinical practice of geriatrics and support practitioners who provide such care.
- Increase the number of physicians knowledgeable about geriatrics and committed to the clinical care of the aged.
- Engage in a vigorous public policy effort that will result in improved health care for older people.
- Promote effective high quality research that addresses the health care problems of older people.
- Increase the membership base of the society, to foster and encourage active participation by its members and to serve the needs of the membership.
- Develop and maintain productive and collaborative relationships with other professional organizations, provider groups, political and lay organizations concerned with the health care of older persons.

Educational programs

“One of the society's major activities over the years has been education,” says Dr. Rubin, current president.

In 1992 the society sponsored its first educational program, *Geriatrics in Practice*, developed by Dr. Black, at St. Margaret Hospital.

In 1993 the society partnered with the Delaware Valley Geriatrics Society and the Washington DC Geriatrics Society to create a Mid-Atlantic conference that addressed stroke and stroke rehab. “We only did it once, but it was very good and an opportunity to collaborate with the whole Mid-Atlantic region,” says Dr. Rubin.

Since 1994 the PA Geriatrics Society-WD has co-sponsored the Clinical Update in Geriatric Medicine, held every year in March or April. The program was initially created by Drs. Black and Rubin as a geriatric board review course. It was originally offered every other year to coincide with when physicians were eligible to take the qualification exam to become board certified in geriatric medicine. When the program became so popular the society decided to offer it every year.

“The program still has co-sponsorship from all of the local hospitals, even those without formal geriatric programs. They still see the value in supporting geriatric education for the doctors in the community,” says Dr. Rubin.

The annual Clinical Update in Geriatric Medicine course attracts about 400 participants yearly. It is the largest CME event in the Pittsburgh area and continues to be sponsored by multiple hospitals and health care organizations, as well as by the University of Pittsburgh. Technical support for the CME credits is provided by the University of Pittsburgh CME office.

In addition to the Clinical Update in Geriatric Medicine every spring, the society presents an annual fall educational program that includes dinner and a presentation by an invited guest speaker. The fall meeting is complimentary for members, but registration is required. Non-members of the society can attend for a nominal fee.

Supporting students interested in geriatric medicine

During its spring meeting, the society awards the David C. Martin Award, in the form of scholarships, to medical students who conduct research in the area of geriatrics and present an abstract. The award is named for Dr. Martin, the first geriatrician in Pittsburgh and a member of the board when the PA/WV Geriatrics Society was created; he established the first geriatric fellowship in Pittsburgh.

This prestigious award supports medical students’ interest in geriatrics by offering recipients an honorarium to be used solely to defray the costs of attending the American Geriatrics Society national conference. Scholarship recipients receive honorariums up to \$1,500. The award’s ultimate goal is to encourage and prepare future physicians in the field of geriatric medicine.

Going strong

The Pennsylvania Geriatric Society—WD received two awards from the American Geriatric Society in 2004 and 2009 respectively for various achievements. “The fact that we won the award in two different years is significant,” says Dr. Rubin. “We may be the only society that has done that. I think we are among the largest of the state affiliates, and we are among the most successful in that we are self-supporting, we have a budget surplus, we provide scholarships and we have hundreds of people who participate in educational events.”

Did you know? Since its inception, the society is proud to have awarded more than \$78,000 to medical students interested in geriatric medicine.

As a founding member and the current president, Dr. Rubin believes the geriatrics society is a natural fit for those physicians and health care professionals who are concerned and involved with the care of the elderly.

“This is where they will see their professional identity,” says Dr. Rubin. “We are their natural home. We are the ones offering geriatric education, providing advocacy and collaborating with other organizations involved with the care of the elderly.”

The society remains dedicated to providing practicing doctors and other health care professionals with the kinds of information they need to be successful in providing the best care to the elderly, especially as changes within medical practice continue.

The society has been financially successful as well. “It is interesting because drug and device manufactures do not line up to give us (geriatricians) funding because we are not doing procedures like putting in artificial hips or opening coronary arteries,” says Dr. Rubin. “So an orthopedic society or a surgical society, for example, may have a much easier time fundraising than you would expect us to; but despite that we are financially stable.”

As a result, the PA Geriatrics Society—WD has been able to financially support outside programs organized by the University of Pittsburgh Geriatrics Division and the Institute on Aging at the University of Pittsburgh, as well as to partner with other agencies (primarily through Dr. Black) in assisting with getting the Physician Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment (POLST) paradigm programs distributed throughout Pennsylvania.

“The society basically started from nothing in 1990 and here it is, 22 years later, still going strong,” says Dr. Rubin. “And most of the same people involved 22 years ago are still involved today. I think that is pretty remarkable.”

Becoming a member

The PA Geriatrics Society—WD currently has 211 members, including 175 active and 36 resident members. Membership is open to MDs and DOs, as well as pharmacists, nurses, physician assistants, social workers, PhDs and more. Yearly dues are \$60, residents are free and student membership is \$10.