

Wright State's Voluntary Faculty: “Partners for a Healthy Community”

by Mark Willis

When physicians and community leaders began to envision a medical school in Dayton, they knew the Miami Valley region had the right combination of resources to turn a dream into reality. Dayton had half a dozen teaching hospitals with residency training programs. The community supported nationally acclaimed research programs such as the Cox Heart Institute and the Fels Research Institute. There was a skilled community of practicing physicians who were qualified and eager to teach — and they had a tradition of working together in a spirit of cooperation.

“Dayton was an ideal place to start a new medical school,” remembers Richard DeWall, M.D. “We had outstanding educational and community resources. It was just a matter of tying them all together.”

A prominent cardiothoracic surgeon who had chaired the surgery department at the Chicago Medical School, Dr. DeWall moved to Dayton in the 1960s to conduct research at the Cox Institute. Depth of experience in academic medicine combined with knowledge of the Dayton community to make Richard DeWall a patient catalyst in the process that led eventually to Wright State University School of Medicine.

Dr. DeWall approached the Association of American Medical Colleges in 1968 with Dayton's idea for a new medical school. He was guided to Harvard and the University of Missouri at Kansas City, one of the oldest and one of the youngest medical schools, for educational models that used community teaching hospitals. A year later he presented the idea to Wright State University president Brage Golding, and the Montgomery County Medical Society contributed \$10,000 to fund the first feasibility study.

Dr. DeWall worked with Robert Conley, Ph.D., dean of Wright State's College of Science and Engineering, to draft the proposal. It called for a community-based medical school that utilized Dayton's existing hospitals instead of building a new university hospital. The community-based model would be more cost-effective, and it also would provide a broader range of clinical experiences to students and residents.

“We knew how ‘town and gown’ politics could divide a medical school from the practice community,” recalls Jack Lewis, M.D., who practiced family medicine in Oakwood then. “The fact that there was no university hospital in Wright State's plan went a long way toward easing those concerns.

“Most of us remembered our own experience at more traditional medical schools,” he adds. “You didn't see real, practicing physicians very often. You had faculty who were experts in their fields, but you weren't exposed to the decision-making that goes into everyday practice. We liked the idea of a different type of medical school that put students out in the community. We wanted it to succeed.”

Dr. DeWall's and Dr. Conley's proposal marshalled the expertise and commitment of practicing physicians who would comprise the new school's voluntary faculty. The proposal carried the endorsement of the MCMS and six other county medical societies. With bipartisan support from Miami Valley legislators, the Ohio General Assembly established Wright State University School of Medicine in 1973.

Selecting the medical school's founding dean was the next crucial step, according to Walter Reiling, Jr., M.D. Then a young surgeon, he worked with Dr. DeWall on the search committee. “The dean had to have strong academic credentials plus the ability to work with the community to get the school off the ground. John Beljan had those qualities. I think history will show that he did an incredible job,” Dr. Reiling says.

John Beljan, M.D., was appointed as Wright State's founding dean in 1974. Simultaneously, he began the work of building facilities on Wright State's main campus, negotiating affiliations with partner institutions in the community, and recruiting a faculty that combined academic physicians with doctors in private practice.

“John Beljan went to great lengths to build cooperation, not competition, with the practice community,” Dr. Lewis remembers. “He became an active member of the MCMS board. He involved community doctors at every step along the way. It wasn't just lip service.”

In September 1976 Wright State's charter class of medical students began an innovative curriculum that emphasized primary care, early contact with patients, and diverse clinical experiences throughout the community. Wright State's voluntary faculty — Drs. DeWall, Lewis, and Reiling were among its founding members — played an instrumental role in the new curriculum's success. According to Dr. Reiling, tapping the experience of voluntary faculty “added relevance and depth to clinical education.”

Today, more than 1,250 community physicians participate in Wright State's voluntary faculty. They supervise medical students and residents at affiliated teaching hospitals as well as their own community clinics and offices. They volunteer their time out of a deep commitment to the future of medicine as a profession.

“Many of us always wanted to teach. Working with Wright State gave us an opportunity to do that and still maintain our own practices,” says Alan Klein, M.D., a general internist who retired recently after 36 years of practice in Dayton. “Teaching forces you to stay current. Students and residents ask a lot of questions, and you have to keep up.

“One of the great surprises for me,” Dr. Klein adds, “has been how patients love to spend time talking with medical students. Patients feel that they're contributing to the next generation of physicians. They're helping to shape the future.”

Dayton's medical community has helped to shape the future in other ways over the years. The MCMS Alliance has raised more than \$160,000 to fund scholarships for Wright State medical students. Community contributions to Wright State's Academy of Medicine have created a revolving loan fund for medical students totalling more than \$1 million.

Wright State University School of Medicine will celebrate its 25th anniversary and thank its voluntary faculty and community partners at “Celebration Sunday with the Temptations” on April 25 at Memorial Hall. Invitations to the gala concert will be mailed to faculty in March. For more information, call 937-775-3802.