

Meeting the Needs of an Aging Population

—By Judi Engle

Spurred on by the burgeoning needs of an aging population, geriatric medicine must now become an integral part of medical education to prepare the nation for the health care system of the future and to care for the baby boomers as they approach old age.

In an innovative partnership with Premier Health Partners and the Dayton VA Medical Center, the Wright State University School of Medicine will form a new Department of Geriatrics. The department will enhance geriatrics education for the next generation of physicians, expand geriatrics research, coordinate interdisciplinary education in geriatrics, and expand geriatric assessment and consultation for the community.

The School of Medicine is on the national forefront of an effort to prepare for the “graying of America.” In 1950, there were only 2,300 centenarians in the U.S. Today there are more than 40,000, and we can expect this population to double in the next decade, according to census projections. We are faced with the demographic reality that 1 in 5 Ohioans will be over the age of 65 by 2030 and one quarter of those will be over the age of 85.

“Caring for an aging society is a national concern,” says Howard Part, M.D., dean of the School of Medicine. “This broad issue must be addressed by an educational structure that will train the next generation of physicians to care for a large increase of elderly patients in the health care system.”

Current Wright State medical students and residents gain a knowledge base and clinical skills to care for older patients through geriatric content interwoven in the curriculum. The new department will coordinate and expand that curriculum as well as geriatrics research efforts. There remains much to learn about the unique needs of an older population. Elderly patients more frequently have chronic, complicated health care needs and quality of life issues that cross disciplines. They respond to treatments and medications differently than younger people. As a person ages, the average number of physician visits increases. Individuals age 45-64 average 7.2 visits a year, compared with

11.4 for individuals 65-84, and 15 for individuals over the age of 85. Across all medical specialties, the percentage of total patient visits for those over the age of 65 was 18.4 percent in 1981.

It jumped to 24.3 percent in 2000. Physicians in cardiology, urology, and ophthalmology already have more than 50 percent of their patient visits in that age group, according to a recent article in *Public Policy and Aging Report*.

The founding partners are combining resources to form the department. Premier Health Partners is making a leadership commitment of \$5 million, and the Dayton VA Medical Center will contribute two new faculty members and critical resources, such as an adult day care program, geriatric assessment center, hospice, and a nursing home. The Dayton VA also offers clinical research potential and data mining opportunities. The School of Medicine will provide space for the new department, support one new faculty line, reallocate the current resources for the Office of Geriatric Medicine and Gerontology, and dedicate existing faculty expertise. The School of Medicine will seek additional support from foundations, private individuals, and governmental sources.

These partners anticipate working and partnering with additional community health care organizations and agencies to best meet the needs of our community, including the aging baby boom generation.