

From my perspective

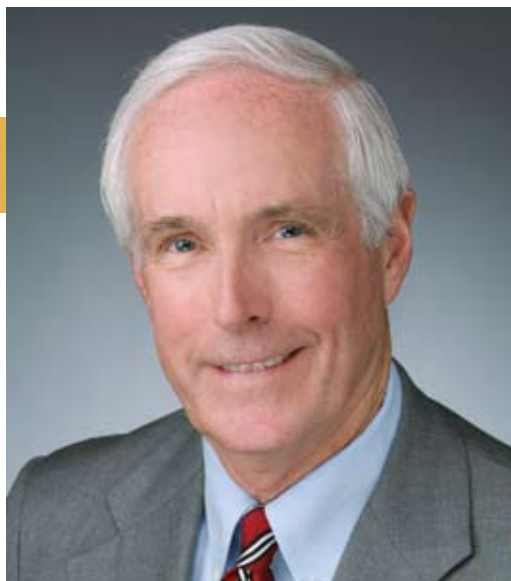
Earlier this year, the American College of Surgeons announced the establishment of a new Health Policy and Research Institute, which is currently based at the University of North Carolina (UNC), Chapel Hill. Already this institute is enhancing the College's capacity for analyzing issues and developing thoughtful position statements, and we anticipate that it will assist this organization in our efforts to become an increasingly prominent presence in the policymaking arena.

Initial steps

Start-up of this important branch of the College is being led under the careful guidance of George F. Sheldon, MD, FACS, Zack D. Owens Distinguished Professor of Surgery at UNC's School of Medicine. Dr. Sheldon, a Past-President of the College, was selected for this position through a national search process. He is receiving administrative assistance from Thomas J. Ricketts, PhD, deputy director of the UNC Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Policy Research.

The Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Policy Research is an institute within the UNC that reports to the vice-chancellor and collaborates with the schools of medicine, dentistry, public health, nursing, and allied health. The center has 140 full-time time researchers, numerous graduate students, and substantial existing grant support from the Health Resources and Services Administration, the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, and the National Institutes of Health.

This collaboration with an existing health policy research center is a new model that allows a professional organization, such as the College, to collaborate with demographers, statisticians, survey experts, and other experts in health services research. The collaboration between the American College of Surgeons and UNC also ensures that the ACS Health Policy and Research Institute has access to the resources and knowledge necessary to cultivate a nationally respected think tank. Drs. Sheldon and Ricketts are both highly regarded authorities on health care issues, and the Sheps Center has a long and distinguished record in conducting health policy research. Basing the institute at UNC during its early stages of growth has allowed us to initiate



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our efforts much more quickly than if we had attempted to build an entirely new program from scratch.

Exploratory projects under way

For its first project, the ACS Health Policy and Research Institute is studying surgeon workforce issues. More specifically, the researchers at the institute are attempting to answer questions about how many surgeons will be needed to ensure patient access to care in the future, which specialties need to attract more trainees, and the causes of geographic disparities in access to surgical care. Dr. Sheldon and his team at UNC have already conducted considerable research regarding the impending surgical workforce crisis and have started to generate ideas about how the federal government can help to ensure that surgeons are accessible to the patients who need their services.

Based on the institute's research, the College has arrived at some of the suggestions we

intend to offer to health policymakers to assist them in addressing the workforce issue. These recommendations include the following: (1) encouraging a well-planned expansion of U.S. medical school graduates and residency training programs, (2) providing federal financial support for specialties with lengthy training requirements, (3) eliminating caps on the number of residents eligible for federal support at each training institution, (4) expanding programs that give financial support to rural physicians to include surgical specialists, and (5) providing incentives for surgeons to take call in our nation's trauma centers and emergency departments.

We anticipate that the ACS Health Policy and Research Institute will continue to play an instrumental role in helping the College to develop specific, scholarly, well-conceived strategies that lawmakers can apply in reforming the nation's health care delivery system. For example, as Congress and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services strive to create a value-based, patient-driven schematic, surgeons will face mounting pressures to document the effectiveness and efficiency of the work they do. The institute will be useful in generating data that can show what surgeons are doing well and where there is room for improvement.

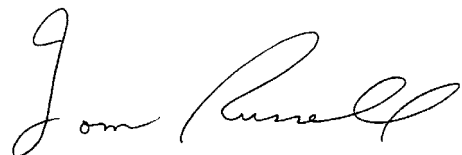
Furthermore, the institute will serve as a think tank where clinical scholars can examine and discuss the complexities of surgical practice and create a vision for the future of our profession. Currently, the College's Division of Research and Optimal Patient Care is benefiting from the assistance of three young research fellows, including a Robert Wood Johnson Clinical Scholar and two new Clinical Scholars in Residence (see related story on pages 93–94 of the July *Bulletin*). We anticipate that the ACS Health Policy and Research Institute also will provide bright, young people who are interested in legislative and regulatory issues with a fertile training ground for exploring fresh, innovative ideas about how we, as a profession and as a nation, can improve patient care through reasoned policy decisions. These programs for young thought leaders ensure that this organization serves as a true "college" for surgeons and is not just another professional association.

Strong, coordinated presence

Because the institute's staff will be conducting research and helping to write position statements on issues affected by the federal government, the program's headquarters will ultimately relocate to the building that will house the College's new Washington Office, which is scheduled for completion in 2010. Having the College's advocacy and institute staffs in the same location will allow for the timely exchange of information and ensure that all of our policy-focused efforts are well coordinated.

Although the ACS Health Policy and Research Institute will be headquartered in Washington, the institute will maintain a relationship with UNC. The fact of the matter is that our Washington Office will not have nearly the same research capabilities or staff capacity as our collaboration with the Sheps Center affords us.

Establishment of the ACS Health Policy and Research Institute presents an opportunity for the American College of Surgeons to play a true leadership role in the health policy arena. It will enable us to serve as a trailblazer by contributing real and factual data upon which to base solutions to the problems that have beset our health care system.



Thomas R. Russell, MD, FACS

If you have comments or suggestions about this or other issues, please send them to Dr. Russell at fmp@facs.org.