

Barriers to Research in Rural Wisconsin

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With a Wisconsin Medical Society Foundation Fellowship during the summer of 2009, I had the opportunity to work with Janette F. Strasburger, MD, in Neenah to examine issues surrounding medical research in rural Wisconsin. As a member of the Wisconsin Academy for Rural Medicine, this project allowed me to do research on a topic that deeply interests me and also had the potential to help rural communities throughout Wisconsin.

The original goal of the project was to evaluate the current state of medical research in rural areas, specifically Northeast Wisconsin. Through this, we hoped to identify ways to improve and expand research being conducted in the area. Before such an expansion, current barriers to research must be identified and then addressed. This project therefore aimed to identify those barriers that prevent rural researchers from performing research projects that would ultimately benefit patients within those communities. Given that there are also barriers to disseminating and publishing results from rural research projects, this project sought to highlight some of the research currently being performed in rural communities in Northeast Wisconsin.

To identify barriers to medical research in rural communities, I

spent the first half of my fellowship developing a survey about medical research for distribution to rural health care professionals in Northeast Wisconsin. The survey covered a variety of topics related to medical research, including perceptions of medical research as a whole, perceptions of publishing research results, and what place medical research currently holds, or should hold, within rural Wisconsin.

As part of the background work necessary to develop the survey, I spent time speaking with various health care professionals throughout Wisconsin. From these discussions, access to medical literature emerged as a significant barrier to both performing research and publishing the results, especially among those not affiliated with a university or hospital system. As such, the second part of my fellowship looked at issues surrounding access to medical literature for unaffiliated rural researchers in comparison to affiliated, university-based researchers. I compared the availability of article references in the first 3 months of the *Wisconsin Medical Journal* from 2009 for the 2 types of researchers above. Resources available at the 2 medical schools within Wisconsin served as the basis for affiliated researcher availability. For the unaffiliated researcher, PubMed and Google Scholar, as

well as the state-sponsored resource Badger Link were used. Once I obtained the relative availabilities, I also calculated the average cost per article to obtain full text references. Specific findings from this assessment have been submitted for publication.

During the course of my project, it became clear that the improvement and expansion of medical research in rural communities will only be possible through the combined efforts and cooperation of the rural research teams, tertiary medical centers, the government, and the community. It is, therefore, our hope to use the results of our project to identify ways in which various groups can work together to improve medical research in rural Wisconsin.

This fellowship experience provided me with an excellent opportunity to grow both personally and professionally. I was able to learn a great deal about the research process including the development, execution, and analysis of a project. I experienced the many obstacles that may occur during the course of a research project and learned how best to work through them to complete the project. I also learned about the importance of collaboration with a wide variety of individuals and organizations. These are skills I will take with me as I continue in my medical career.

The goal of the Wisconsin Medical Society Foundation's Summer Fellowship in Government and Community Service Program is to provide medical students a public health research opportunity within a Wisconsin community. The experience exists to educate students about ways in which the medical profession can work to improve health through connections to both community organizations and government. Each student receives a \$3500 stipend. The fellowships require the support of donors to make the experi-

ence possible and physician mentors who help guide and foster students' projects.

In 2009, the Foundation provided 6 fellowships, which will be highlighted in the *Wisconsin Medical Journal* throughout the year. For more program information and sponsorship opportunities, please contact Foundation Executive Director, Rebecca Thompson, CPA, at rebecca.thompson@wismed.org.

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