

Physician's Passion for Books Benefits Youngest Patients and Families

Kendi Parvin, *WMJ* Managing Editor

“I grew up with books; I read constantly. My relatives always said they never knew what I looked like because I always had a book stuck in front of my face,” said Wendy Molaska, MD, a family physician who has made her passion for reading an integral part of her practice.

Since her residency, Dr Molaska has been a champion of Reach Out and Read (ROR), a program that promotes early literacy and school readiness by getting books in the hands of children beginning at 6 months of age.

During well-child visits, physicians give each child between 6 months and 5 years old a new book to take home that is age-, developmentally and culturally appropriate. They also discuss with parents the importance of reading aloud to their children each day, and for those parents who may feel uncomfortable or hesitant to read aloud to their kids, they offer encouragement and suggestions.

ROR data indicate that while “34% of American children entering kindergarten lack the basic language skills they will need to learn to read,” the ROR model is an effective, low-cost intervention. “Parents involved with ROR are 4 times more likely to read with their children; parents for whom English is a second language are 10 times more likely to read with their children. Children participating in ROR score significantly higher on vocabulary tests and start kindergarten with a 6-month developmental edge.”

“I got introduced to Reach Out and Read in residency and thought it was such a cool program,” said Dr Molaska, who completed



Wendy Molaska, MD

her residency at North Memorial Hospital in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where the diverse population included African American, Hispanic, Hmong and Somali patients.

“I saw how important Reach Out and Read was because it was a very underserved population and English was a second language for many patients,” Dr Molaska said. “Many of the parents were illiterate, so we did a lot in terms of other literacy skills; we had referral sources to help them. Even without reading ability, parents can still point to pictures and work on language. It’s time together—without TV.”

Following her residency, Dr Molaska moved to Fort Morgan, Colorado, where she practiced

in a federally funded community health center.

“The Fort Morgan clinic didn’t have ROR but needed it,” she said. “Its population was very underserved, mostly Spanish speaking, and many of the kids had no books at home. When it comes to buying food or buying books, people are going to buy food.”

So Dr Molaska, who says she “can’t imagine a life without books,” worked with the Colorado Reach Out and Read Coalition as well as an Americorps volunteer at the clinic to establish a ROR program there. In addition to providing new books to children during their well-child visits, gently used books were placed in the exam rooms and waiting room for patients to take home. Families also were encouraged to visit their local library.

After 4 years in Colorado, Dr Molaska returned to her native Wisconsin in 2008, joining Dean Clinic-Platteville. And when she learned the clinic did not have a ROR program, she quickly went to work to establish one. Unlike Colorado, at the time Wisconsin did not have a ROR coalition to help establish the new program. (See sidebar.) But that didn’t deter her.

“I feel that it’s such a huge part of my practice in general that I couldn’t give it up,” Dr Molaska said. “I think everyone can benefit from the message of reading.”

Dr Molaska completed the necessary paperwork and applied for grants to secure startup funding. Thanks in part to a \$2000 grant from the Wisconsin Medical Society Foundation, the program was launched in May 2009.

For Dr Molaska’s clinic, which has 700 to 800 well-child checks for patients in the

target age range, the program costs about \$2000 per year. The only overhead is the cost of books, which are usually donated or purchased at a substantial discount through Scholastic and other book groups. Since July 2009 the clinic has distributed more than 2000 new books.

As the medical director for the clinic's ROR program, Dr Molaska completes and submits progress reports to the ROR National Center twice a year and continues to seek funding. In addition to grants from local businesses and larger corporations, she said the program has received support from the national ROR center (when available) as well as Dean Health System, which Molaska says "is recognizing the huge impact the program has." Community members, colleagues, local groups and others have donated both money and books as well. In fact, when she and her husband were married earlier this year, they asked that guests consider making a donation to the ROR program or one of their other favorite charities instead of buying gifts.

Obtaining funding for books hasn't been the only challenge Dr Molaska has faced, however. Initially, some of her colleagues expressed reservations about getting involved in the program.

"I think for a lot of physicians the initial reaction is we're already busy; we already do all this paperwork; it's just another thing we're adding on to our plates," she said. "That was the big drawback to providers initially. Everybody thinks it's going to add extra time, but it doesn't. It really doesn't."

"Your first minutes in the exam room are always trying to establish rapport with the child and being able to get into his or her space so that later you can do the exam," Dr Molaska said. "If I'm coming in with a book for them it's a much easier way to establish rapport." As she talks with parents about any concerns they have, she said she also is able to assess the child's gross motor skills, visual tracking, verbalization and other developmental milestones by watching how he or she interacts with the book.

"Kids come in for their well child checks and we give them shots and a sticker. Now we



Family physician Wendy Molaska, MD, shares books with 3-year-old Owen, 5-year-old Catie and their mom Amanda. The books are part of Reach Out and Read, an evidence-based program championed by Molaska that encourages parents to read aloud to their kids each day.

get to give them a book and we get to use the book for our own benefit. So it really doesn't add time," she continued.

And despite some initial hesitation, today Dr Molaska's colleagues have embraced the program. "I now find my colleagues debating which book they want to give their patients and reminiscing about their favorite children's books."

In addition to her involvement with her own clinic's ROR program, Dr Molaska recently became a certified provider trainer for Reach Out and Read Wisconsin. As a trainer, she provides all-staff orientations for clinics applying to start a Reach Out and Read program.

"I am really excited about becoming more involved in such a great organization as Reach Out and Read," said Dr Molaska. "ROR is a great opportunity for any pediatrics department to help develop quality early childhood literacy for their patients."

"When you start doing the program, you see how grateful the parents are and how excited the kids are," Dr Molaska continued. "Now they come in and ask, 'Dr Wendy, where's my book?'"

For more information about Reach Out and Read, visit <http://www.reachoutandread.org/>.

Reach Out and Read at a Glance

At the national level, more than 4 million children and their families are served annually through ROR programs located in more than 4900 hospitals and health centers throughout the country, including Puerto Rico, the US Virgin Islands and 55 US military bases. Each year, children receive more than 6.5 million books.

Founded in 2010, Reach Out and Read Wisconsin is a statewide coalition that provides technical assistance, quality assurance and book support to participating ROR programs. There are currently about 60 programs in Wisconsin serving more than 44,300 children and families. An initiative of Children's Health Alliance of Wisconsin and a partnership with American Family Children's Hospital and Children's Hospital of Wisconsin, ROR Wisconsin distributes over 72,000 new books annually while working to expand the program. Dipesh Navsaria MD, MPH, MSLIS serves as the coalition's medical director; Karin Mahony, MEd, MSW, is project manager.

Visit <http://www.chawisconsin.org/ror.htm> to learn more.

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