Leadership in Gastroenterology: Developing Fellows for Future Responsibility

Brett W. Sadowski, MD, FACP1,2

1Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, Bethesda, MD
2Medstar Georgetown University Hospital, Washington, DC

THE TIME TO PREPARE TO LEAD OUR FIELD IS NOW

Physicians represent some of the most highly trained professionals in the United States, dedicating more than a decade of their lives to imbuing themselves with a sense of duty to those they serve and developing the expertise required to treat complex patients. Despite their crucial position in health care delivery, their potential as leaders within the nation’s health system is often unrealized. Be it leading and managing multi-disciplinary divisions, engaging in intradepartmental, large scale quality improvement initiatives, or inspiring others as representatives in national organizations, physicians are positioned to have a broad impact far beyond direct patient care. As frontline clinicians, trainees have a unique perspective, which allows them to observe and make improvements on policies that affect their patients on a day-to-day basis. Fresh ideas that disrupt practices can optimize care in an age different from the one in which older policies were crafted. In a system that mainly focuses on medical knowledge and patient care domains, it is easy for fellows to neglect the fact that they are the leaders who will take on the mantle of responsibility within years, if not already during training. Although we often ask whether we are doing enough research or board preparation outside our direct clinical time, how often do we reflect on our preparation to lead? Is that any less important?

CONCEPTS TO CONSIDER

Although just being on the job can allow physicians to “accidentally” gain leadership experience, dedicating time to formally develop and assess your abilities can help consolidate these skills. For instance, reflecting on common occurrences, including your communication with colleagues and ability to give feedback, may enhance your team’s performance. You can also use these skills managing conflict more efficiently so that your group’s goals can be met. Assessing your comfort with different leadership styles outside of your comfort zone is also something to think about because varying them between authoritarian, paternalistic, hands-off, or democratic strategies can increase situational versatility and also allow for better followership. Although these only scratch the surface of what leadership can mean to you, your departments, and your patients, they can open the door to countless discussions and reflections that can ready you for the next opportunities.

USING FELLOWSHIP AS A LEADERSHIP LABORATORY

There are several specialties that you can consider when reflecting on your own readiness to lead, both locally and through the national organizations, some with titles and some without. Within your own institution, leading quality improvement efforts can be a gateway to enhancing your own ability to manage multidisciplinary teams. For instance, developing systems-based solutions to problems such as inadequate hepatitis C screening or follow up after positive fecal immunochemical tests would allow for experiential learning of clinical leadership skills while improving health care delivery. Beyond leading these efforts, fellows are also ideally positioned to mentor and coach residents and students in practicing these quality improvement and clinical leadership skills. Another opportunity to gain experience in some programs includes serving as a chief fellow in your final year of training.

Formal curricula exist to help programs develop dedicated sessions to teach concepts related to leadership in health care, although outcomes-based research related to these is generally lacking. Finally, opportunities to engage in the national organizations related to our specialty provide extraordinary opportunities to learn from and interact with seasoned leaders in the field. All of the national organizations in our field (ACG, AGA, AASLD, and ASGE) offer committees and special interest groups for which trainees can apply.
to be exposed to the governance of the organizations early in their training. In addition, the ACG offers an opportunity through its Young Physician Leadership Scholars Program, providing an opportunity for senior fellows and early faculty to engage in leadership and advocacy skill development while focusing on organizational behavior and executive decision-making.

There is no doubt that our generation of physicians will need to lead a transformative change of our nation’s complex and constantly evolving health care system. Spending time reflecting on this fact, using fellowship as a leadership laboratory, and readying a versatile and malleable skill set will improve our community and the care of our patients.