

## Stepping up to the Plate in the Throes of a Pandemic

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WHEN ED FELLER AND I were appointed Co-editors-in-Chief of the *Rhode Island Medical Journal* (RIMJ), a question was raised regarding the relevance of both the Journal and the Rhode Island Medical Society (RIMS), its publisher. This disquieting question has gnawed at me for the past year. In



a world of blogs, Instagram, Facebook, advanced publication of manuscripts, and the Internet's dissatisfying and often indistinguishable amalgamation of opinion and fact, what are the roles of RIMJ and RIMS?

From a historical standpoint, RIMS and RIMJ are part of the living fabric of Rhode Island's medical community. The Rhode Island Medical Society, chartered in 1812, is the eighth oldest medical society in the United States. At one point, RIMS consisted of seven different local societies; the leading local society, the Providence Medical Association, began publishing the *Providence Medical Journal* in 1900. In 1917, RIMS assumed full ownership of the bimonthly publication, and the *Rhode Island Medical Journal* was born. From its inception, RIMJ has always been topical. In the first year of the Journal, Dr. Richard C. Cabot advertised The Fisk Hospital in Brookline, Ma., "for the cure of the morphine habit," as addiction was of singular concern toward the end of World War I.<sup>1,2</sup>

More than a century later, RIMJ continues to publish research regarding the latest data on the opioid epidemic.

While history and traditions are important and reflect continuity and evoke feelings of nostalgia, current events remind me that the significance of RIMJ and RIMS extends

far beyond a connection to our past. Today, we are faced with an existential crisis as we battle a pandemic that threatens Rhode Island's population, strains our health services, and afflicts the entire nation and world. In 1918 the influenza pandemic resulted in more than 2,000 deaths in Rhode Island; similar numbers, or more, are projected in 2020.<sup>3</sup> RIMJ has published early papers reporting on atypical presentations of COVID-19 as well as co-existence of respiratory viruses with the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Additional manuscripts examining other aspects of the pandemic are both in press and planned. Importantly, statistics, research, and case studies pertinent to the health of Rhode Islanders and southern New Englanders are regularly published in RIMJ. The Journal's far reaching impact is evident – it is read in more than 100 countries, receives approximately 15,000 unique views annually, and has had approximately

30,000 pages viewed over the past year. We have been quoted in the *New York Times* and in other media outlets.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, RIMJ plays a crucial role in the education and academic development of medical students, residents, and fellows in Rhode Island. During the past year more than 200 students, residents, fellows, and faculty were cited in RIMJ.

As Paul Starr noted in *The Social Transformation of American Medicine*, medical societies, including RIMS,

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have helped consolidate medicine's increasingly consequential role in 20th-century society. RIMS' successes have been many; the medical society contributed to public health advances, improvements in medical education, and boosted surgical innovation during the 20th century. Unfortunately, in the late 20th and early 21st century, the Rhode Island Medical Society, like many local and national medical societies, suffered an erosion of support. This has mirrored the degradation of our most important and valued American institutions, especially during the past four years. Indeed, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has not acquitted itself well during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic

– at least, initially – and many state departments of health found themselves inadequately prepared and underfunded for our current challenges.

Yet, the current pandemic has created opportunities for local leadership. The Rhode Island Department of Health, hamstrung by a national shortage of testing for COVID-19, has responded vigorously to the crisis. The Rhode Island Medical Society has also stepped up to the plate. RIMS has always supported its membership with physician wellness initiatives, defended physicians affected by poor user interface with electronic medical records, and now, during the pandemic, the Society continues to advocate for physicians as we prepare for our surge, leading to an executive

order limiting liability for physicians and health care workers. The Society has also taken an active role in telehealth expansion, supported license reciprocity, and championed COVID-19 as a work-related illness for providers.

None of this happens in a vacuum. Physician advocacy and leadership has resulted in a new and profound relevance for our local medical society. Now, more than ever, it is important to affirm an institution that has provided continuity within our community for more than 200 years, and which continues to support both its constituency and the citizens of Rhode Island. No one else is looking out for us. It is again time to renew support for RIMS and the *Rhode Island Medical Journal*. ❖

## References

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