The National Clinician Scholars Program—Continuing the Legacy of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Clinical Scholars Program

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The report of my death was an exaggeration
- Mark Twain in the New York Journal of 2 June 1897

Many were surprised and saddened when, in early 2014, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation announced it was concluding its support for the Clinical Scholars Program and that the cohort entering July, 2015 would be its last. Among those saddened by the announcement were those residents who had aimed to apply. The program had been open to those who had completed residencies in any specialty.

We are writing to tell you that the four current sites of the RWJF Clinical Scholars Program (University of California – Los Angeles, University of Michigan, University of Pennsylvania, and Yale University) have created the National Clinician Scholars Program (NCSP) to advance new visions based on the legacy of the original program. Those who had hoped to apply to be Clinical Scholars entering July 2016 can now apply to be National Clinician Scholars for the same year. More can be learned about that process here: nationalcsp.org.

There will be some changes to the program, because health and health care are changing. One change is that the program will now also accept doctorally trained nurses, whereas in the past the program trained only physicians. The nation needs inclusive partnerships to address its challenging health and health care goals. Second, once the NCSP is launched, we aim to expand the program beyond the current four sites. Those details are not yet worked out, but the objective is to recognize that many other institutions have the ability to contribute toward our goals. Alongside these changes, many of the central elements that made the RWJF Clinical Scholars Program so effective and valuable will be maintained.

We are excited about this new initiative, and we hope you are, too. It would be hard to overstate the importance of the Clinical Scholars Program to academic pediatrics, to medicine as a whole, or to the last several decades of health and health care in the US more generally. This program can be credited with bringing health services research and health policy activity into mainstream academic medicine by selecting and training physicians to advance health and health care in ways decidedly more social than biomedical. In addition to supporting its “Scholars,” the program supported academic infrastructure and professional networks both to create a new field, and to accelerate the recognition of that field—all with tremendous support from the VA. Pediatrics was hardly the only beneficiary of this monumental effort. Clinical Scholars, now nearly 2,000 of them, have come from all specialties.

The program began in 1969 with support from the Carnegie Corporation and the Commonwealth Fund. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation took over financial responsibility in 1973 and the Veterans Health Administration became a central partner. There are reports in the literature of the program’s start,¹ and a frank and engaging recounting of its origins was published as part of a Festschrift to Hal Holman, one of the program’s founders.² The program did not have humble beginnings. It grew from a bold vision and its output has been spectacular. There are departments and training programs in academic institutions across the nation that would not exist today were it not for the field building the program supported—not just at the few places that have been training sites, but at the many places where alumni have landed and made contributions. Leadership in US health and health care—in industry, government, philanthropy, clinical service, and academia—is peppered with those who grew up in this program or were touched by it.

That’s why we thought it was so essential to keep going. We have worked closely with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the VA in the design of the National Clinician Scholars Program and value the shared goals going forward. In parallel, the Foundation has been working toward the design of a new set of human capital programs of its own. In the meantime, we are delighted to announce that the National Clinician Scholars Program is up and open for business.