

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

Our Wand, Writ Large

Harry P. Selker, MD, MSPH

Yes, this path is seductive and must be managed, but to leave your wand unused for what you really care about—that's a shame!



Recently I asked chiefs of general medicine (i.e. members of our sister organization Association of Chiefs and Leaders of General Internal Medicine (ACLGIM)) about their jobs—what they liked most, what they liked least, and what they would change if they had a magic wand.

What they liked most included mentoring and developing faculty, working with great colleagues as a leader, and representing and advocating for GIM on their own campuses and beyond. What they liked least included dealing with administrative work, attending meetings that seemed unproductive, fiscal and organizational constraints, and individuals who seemed to generate disproportionate challenges. With a magic wand, they would fix many things: Clinics would be staffed sufficiently to be fully functional patient-centered medical homes with electronic health records that were interoperable among care sites; all members of the GIM family would be integrated across ambulatory, hospital, community, educational, research, and institutional roles, with each articulating and serving the GIM mission; and funds and opportunities would be sufficient to support the development and success of GIM faculty in research, education, and clinical care.

I think the chiefs were a bit shy. They neglected to include their change-the-world work. I know most of the dozen who answered my query, and they have very high purposes to which they would certainly apply a wand. They are deeply involved in SGIM, other organizations, and national efforts, and they contribute a great deal of energy and

time to the advancement of GIM, medicine overall, health care, and public health. But their answers told of their objectives in their local roles as chief, not of their additional work to change and improve things on a larger scale and over time, which illustrates again how hard it is to keep your eyes on the prize when your nose is to the grindstone.

Of course, what they liked most and liked least are not unique to chiefs. We all enjoy helping a student or colleague in their work or career trajectory. None of us enjoys administrative burdens and resource constraints, especially as they seem to continue to tighten. And in any of our hands, a magic wand would get lots of use.

What about that magic wand? Of course, it is nothing other than our own hands, linked to our imagination, vision, and energy. It is the conductor's baton, ready to signal the start of a piece. The music is in mind, detailed in the score, but not yet in the air. Perhaps it is a great symphony; perhaps it is a grade school chorus. Perhaps it is a famous medical center; perhaps it is a community clinic. Some contributions will be evident immediately—others not at that place and time. If you help a person's health, it is a lasting contribution. If you teach others how to be more effective in their work, it also will echo in the work of those whom they teach. If you make an advance via your research, it will resonate in the improved care of many. With your wand, look for those opportunities that convert what you like—and what you don't like—into advances you want to see. If it's important to

you, you should be doing something to make it happen. And as we aggregate around such work, we also fulfill part of what the chiefs wanted to accomplish with their wands—that all generalists work together as a unified community.

Assuming that our wand only can be used a limited number of times, how should we use it? We certainly could spend its entire yearly allocation solving local problems. However, we also want to address the overall state of GIM, health care, and public health. And in this larger vision, "Chance favors the prepared mind." Without a framework for understanding opportunities for impact, we will miss them.

Yet we seem too busy to respond to new opportunities. We can barely complete patient notes, write grants, finish manuscripts, and attend all our meetings. We cannot possibly add more! To some extent, this is a canard. Not all additional activities add work; by synergies and networking, some may actually expedite overall work and accelerate reaching goals. Perhaps an opportunity arises to serve on an important committee, and you are about to exercise your "No" reflex. However, perhaps you really should know about the area to be addressed by the committee, making the opportunity a very efficient way to learn a lot. This might lead to a new area of endeavor for you that would enhance your career and satisfaction. Maybe there are others involved—some you know and some whom you would like to know—as well as possibilities for establishing relation-

continued on page 2

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

continued from page 1

ships with good people and colleagues and making important connections. And a degree of citizenship is important. Yes, this path is seductive and must be managed, but to leave your wand unused for what you really care about—that's a shame!

We need to attend to balancing these local and national objectives. For the GIM chiefs, and for us all, our constant and diligent efforts on local issues can obscure our vision of our larger objectives. Besides attenuating our impact, this can contribute to our being overwhelmed by

doing what we like least. The chiefs and the rest of us need to help each other in this balance. For ourselves and for our overall impact in using our attention, energy, and time—our wand—we must consider all our objectives, writ large.

SGIM