

## PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

**Past, Present, and Future Executive Leadership of SGIM**

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**Our organization owes a great debt to the previous executive directors; we will owe a chunk of our future to Frank Fortin.**



**S**GMIM, now in its 40th year as an organization, has had only two executive directors in all those years—until June 6, when Frank Fortin will begin his stay as the third in that position. It's been a privilege to participate in the selection process this year—a process that illustrates many of the values of our organization.

First, a brief digression into history. SGIM was actually born "SREPCIM"—or the "Society for Research and Education in Primary Care Internal Medicine"—and held its inaugural meeting in 1978. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation awarded start-up funding to the nascent organization, originally housed within the American College of Physicians (ACP). In 1988, breaking free of the ACP and striking out independently, we became the Society of General Internal Medicine and hired our first "real" executive director, Elnora Rhodes. Elnora is legendary, and along with founding fathers Bob Lawrence, Steve Schroeder, Frank Davidoff, John Noble, and Tom Delbanco can claim responsibility for the inception, growth, and rise of the organization. She was a special force who touched all of us who knew her. An accomplished musician, Elnora spent five years in the Peace Corps in Peru and Nigeria before settling in Washington, DC, at the ACP. Enormously charismatic and warm, as Kurt Kroenke said, "Elnora infused SGIM with a sense joy and celebration." (See *Forum* articles about Elnora Rhodes from March 1997, July 1997, November 1997, May 2001, and October 2012.)

After Elnora came David Karlson. David had an impressive background that was a great fit for SGIM: With a

PhD in education, David was a former dean of continuing education at the University of Maryland and former chief operating officer of a medical organization. He was a steady force in the organization during a phase of impressive growth. When he took over the organization, SGIM had four staff members. At the time of his retirement last June, SGIM's now-owned (and not leased) offices housed a total of 16 staff positions serving 3,000 members.

Last year, David notified Council that he would be retiring. Marshall Chin has written about the initial stages of the new executive director search process (December 2015). We hired search firm Association Strategies, Inc. (ASI), to lead the search effort. The firm put out advertisements, surveyed SGIM leaders past and present to solicit names of potential candidates, and utilized its professional contacts to generate a robust list of names. ASI interviewed more than 70 candidates and presented our search committee with the 11 best qualified. From those 11, our diverse group of search committee members had very clear agreement on which five we should interview.

The search committee members changed over the course of the year as some members needed to excuse themselves because of personal or professional conflicts. New members volunteered to make the substantial time commitment needed for multiple conference calls and two in-person meetings to interview semi-finalists and finalists. As a group, we represented SGIM's broad interests well; the Committee included:

- A former SGIM president as committee chair (Bill Moran);
- A staff member (Kay Ovington, acting executive director);
- A junior member (Brita Roy, the associate member on Council);
- An Association of Chiefs & Leaders of General Internal Medicine (ACLGIM) member and former ACLGIM president (Valerie Weber);
- A Disparities Task Force member (Monica Lypson);
- A hospitalist (Dan Hunt);
- A financial wizard (Martha Gerrity, treasurer); and
- The person most anxious about next year (me).

All SGIM members are expert interviewers—we interview patients, we hire staff members and faculty physicians, and some of us have interviewed hundreds and hundreds of internship candidates. The search committee came together to share its favorite questions and strategies and divided up so that each of us would ask the same question of each candidate. The questions we chose to ask represented our reflections on what is important to SGIM, our diverse members, and our future needs. It was a privilege to get to work with this talented leadership group.

The questions we asked in the first round included:

1. Why would you make a good executive director for SGIM?
2. What role do you see social media and technology playing in the future of SGIM, and what is your experience in these areas?

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3. SGIM has a strong interest in career development for its membership. What experience do you have in that area?
4. How would you support and strengthen ACLGIM?
5. What experience do you have in membership retention, growth, and diversification?
6. Describe what a good day at work looks like for you.
7. What are some areas you would focus on in terms of income generation?
8. SGIM might benefit from an internal audit in terms of projects, staff allocation, and resource utilization. What experience do you have doing internal audits?
9. Describe the ideal relationships and partnerships that SGIM should cultivate with related organizations.
10. What sort of executive director would be you be from the staff's viewpoint? What is your leadership style?
11. What is the most difficult situation you have encountered with volunteer leadership (i.e. a board or council), and how did you handle it?
12. What are your key strengths, and how would you use these strengths to advance SGIM's mission and goals?

After interviewing the five people who looked fantastic on paper, we spent several hours identifying two finalists to invite back. Each prepared a 20- to 30-minute presentation by choosing two of the following three areas to reflect on the future of SGIM:

1. Membership engagement, growth, retention, and diversity;
2. Revenue growth and diversification; and
3. Enhancement of the organization's stature, profile, and influence in the health care environment.

After two days, two dinners, and multiple hours with the two finalists, our diverse group of expert interviewers found amazing alignment—we had a unanimous choice. (Has anything in SREPCIM, or SGIM, ever been unanimous?) Frank Fortin will be our next executive director. I want to tell you a little bit about Frank and about why we chose him.

Frank comes to SGIM after a career based in communications. The son of a Providence College English professor, Frank worked in journalism after he graduated from PC—first as a television news producer and then as a print editor. After five years in marketing, he joined the Massachusetts Medical Society (MMS) as communications director in 1998. In 2011, Frank was named their chief digital strategist and communications director. In that role, he was a member of the senior management group; he has been responsible for all digital products and services—including the website, membership platform, continuing medical education, and electronic marketing—for developing and executing MMS's legislative and regulatory advocacy messaging and for all external communications activities. For the past year, he has been working intensively on the Massachusetts opioid crisis among his many projects. Of note, MMS has an annual budget of \$100 million and 25,000 members.

What impressed us most about Frank, however, was not his background—it was his sense of his future with SGIM. In the three weeks between the first and second round interviews, he must have read every word written on our website, and he devoured many issues of the *Forum* and *JGIM*. He showed us that he really understands who we are—and he very clearly is passionate about the things we are passionate about. He spoke eloquently about generalism and primary care, about clinical care and

research, and about internists at the center of policy and value. Here are a few quotes I wrote down during his interviews:

- “The future of medicine is through internal medicine” (about SGIM's strategic opportunities).
- “You can have anything you want just not everything you want” (about how to reconcile our big ideas with our finances).
- “A duck paddling furiously in the water looks serene on top” (about concern for staff burnout and resilience).
- “SGIM is your home for year-round learning, and SGIM is creating the future” (Frank's sense of SGIM's value to members).

When he finished his final presentation to us in the second interview, Frank said the most meaningful thing to our committee: “I really want to work with you guys.”

We have high expectations for Frank, in part because Elnora and David preceded him. As an organization, we are facing both threats and opportunities. Our new executive director will be responsible for sustaining and growing our future. He will be working closely with Kay Ovington over the coming months. Kay has done a truly fantastic job as interim executive director, and we are all grateful that she will ease this transition.

What kind of executive director will Frank Fortin be? Will someone be reading this column in 18 years, upon his retirement, to find out how it all started? Where will SGIM be when he completes his stay? Our organization owes a great debt to the previous executive directors; we will owe a chunk of our future to Frank Fortin. I look forward to welcoming him and working with him in the coming years.

SGIM