

## PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

# SGIM AND THE NEWTONIAN SOLUTION

Thomas H. Gallagher, MD, SGIM President, and Giselle Corbie-Smith, MD, SGIM President-elect

*As we transition to the Corbie-Smith presidency, the next year will involve significant attention to strategic planning and focusing our priorities as an organization. These priorities will inform work on long-term financial planning for the organization and increased attention to fiscal stability. We will be implementing recommendations from the Communication Audit to improve internal and external communications. And there will be continued attention to organizational efficiency in order to stimulate innovation and focus on emerging issues facing our members.*



As it turns out, Sir Isaac Newton was on to something. Newton's First Law is a statement of inertia, highlighting that objects will remain in their state of motion unless a force acts to change that motion. Almost 100 years after Newton's death, mathematician

Lazare Carnot published the first description of what is now understood as entropy, the notion that within any closed system, the random and disordered interaction of moving parts represents a waste of energy. This definition was later expanded to include the understanding that entropy naturally increases. SGIM, as an organization of energetic generalists, has many pieces in motion, some of which need redirection, a few at rest that need to move forward, and all at risk of organizational entropy. Conscious effort will be required to harness and leverage that energy into coordinated and focused forward movement, since none of us have extra human or material resources.

SGIM as an organization is currently doing many great things, but is overcommitted and lacks a stable structure to support all of the important work in which our members are engaged, resulting in outstanding staff being stretched to the limit. This year, Council decided to take a look at our overall structure in order to focus the energy of volunteer members and staff, and to ensure we are organized in a way that provides appropriate support for all important ongoing work. What we saw was a complex mixture of Committees, Task Forces, and Interest Groups, all doing important things, but some more aligned with our strategic priorities than others, and overall insufficient coordination that has led to duplication of effort with a strain on human resources.

Of particular interest during this review was the role of Task Forces in our organization, a topic that was examined 10 years ago by the Council. The resultant 2008 report articulates how Task Forces can best serve

the organization. Their recommendations, adopted by Council, emphasize that Task Forces are intended to be time-limited groups that address topics of importance to the Society that cut across multiple Committees, produce specific deliverables, and are reviewed for continuation every three years. Sensing that the current state of our Task Forces might not be aligned with this policy, Council decided to undertake an in-depth review focused specifically on the role of Task Forces within the organization.

This review process, led by Council members Eva Aagaard, April Fitzgerald, and Luci Leykum, was intensive and far-reaching, involving numerous conversations with SGIM staff, listening calls with Task Force and Committee chairs, and study of multiple documents, including the original charge documents for each Task Force, as well as their current annual and mid-year reports. Council also devoted a significant portion of the December in-person retreat to this topic.

Several conclusions emerged from this in-depth review of the current state. First, Council applauded the outstanding work that the current group of Task Forces is doing and wanted to ensure that this work has an enduring structure, as these accomplishments have greatly benefited the Society. Nonetheless, there was considerable misalignment between Task Forces and their envisioned role in the 2008 policy. Council concluded that this misalignment has occurred gradually but steadily over time and stemmed largely from the lack of triennial review of each Task Force called for in the 2008 report. This created several entropic challenges, including:

- **Opportunity cost: our staff capacity to support Task Forces has been stretched to the point where adding new Task Forces to address emerging issues is very difficult;**

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- **Inefficiency:** due to drift of the goals and activities of Task Forces over time relative to SGIM's strategic priorities, as well as redundancies between the activities of Task Forces and Committees;
- **Communication problems:** information flow is not optimized between SGIM staff, Committees, Task Forces, Interest Groups, Work Groups, and Council; and
- **Inconsistency in composition:** wide variation in the size, membership, governance, and scope of work of Task Forces.

Council considered two possible root causes for the gap between policy and practice related to our Task Forces—first, the possibility that the policy itself was fundamentally flawed; second, if the policy was sound, the difficulty likely arose from misapplication of the policy. After careful consideration, Council unanimously affirmed that the policy articulated in the 2008 Report on Task Forces was sound and should guide the organization going forward. Therefore, drawing again from Newton, the solution called for the application of energy to redirect the motion of our organization related to its Task Forces. This process is ongoing and has evolved in several steps.

- **Step 1: define organizational structures and associated staff support.** Council and SGIM staff worked closely on articulating our organizational structures and associated staff support. Part of this work involved the creation of a new organizational unit known as **Commissions**. Commissions are groups addressing topics of enduring importance to the Society that require considerable coordination with multiple Committees or other units. Commissions are expected to achieve specific deliverables consistent with the Council's

strategic priorities and be reviewed biannually. The degree of staff support associated with each group is important, as one distinguishing factor between the different organizational units is the degree of staff support provided to each. A document describing each of these organizational units and associated staff support was distributed to the leaders of Committees and Task Forces, and is available to members on request. The document also clearly identifies those activities within the organization that are intended to be time-limited and the process for oversight and review of each organizational unit.

- **Step 2: reorganization of all current Task Forces.** On February 1<sup>st</sup> of this year, each Task Force was notified of Council's proposed disposition for their group, which involved every Task Force being transitioned into either an Interest Group, Commission, being integrated into an existing Committee. These proposed dispositions also included transfer of some Task Force activities (such as programming for the Annual Meeting or development of mentoring programs) into the relevant Committee, with the remainder of that Task Force's portfolio continuing via an Interest Group. Each Task Force was given six weeks to respond to Council's proposal, after which Council will make and communicate its final decision in advance of the upcoming Annual Meeting so that each of these groups can incorporate this decision into their planning for the next year.
- **Step 3: peeling the onion.** Anytime a reorganization of this magnitude is undertaken, an initial change precipitates the need for further reorganization. An important finding that emerged from Council's review

of organizational structures was the presence of inefficiencies and some duplication related to developing programming for the Annual Meeting and creating high-functioning mentoring and career development programs. The next step in this process will involve reshaping how the organization approaches the Annual Meeting Program Committee, as well as our career development and mentoring initiatives. This process has also stimulated the Task Forces to take a fresh look at their priorities and initiatives, with new ideas emerging. We anticipate issuing a call for new Task Forces with a special focus on topics that are forward-looking and innovative. Throughout, a continuous improvement framework will guide Council as we implement these changes and refine our approach going forward.

Newton didn't stop with just one fundamental law of motion. His third law notes that every action leads to a reaction. Council is acutely aware that making changes of this magnitude can be difficult under the best of circumstances, and that some of the decisions have caused discomfort and disappointment to members who have volunteered their time, making outstanding contributions over many years. It is our strong belief that taking these active steps to reshape our organizational structure is critical to avoiding further increases in organizational entropy and additional challenges down the road. However, these long-term benefits certainly do not ease the short-term discomfort. Council hopes that the membership can engage constructively in our shared goals of a high-functioning learning organization that has the structures and bandwidth to address the issues we all care about.

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internal and external communications. And there will be continued attention to organizational efficiency in order to stimulate innovation and focus on emerging issues facing our members.

Council's intention as we undertake this far-reaching reorganization has been to take action that brings

all of our motion into closer alignment with our goals and reduces entropy. Physicist Marie Curie, the first female Nobel Prize winner, noted that "I was taught that the way of progress was neither swift nor easy." We welcome your thoughts about how best to move together down this important path.

**SGIM**