

Profile

Marc Sedwitz, M.D.

Trauma surgeon elected chief of staff of Scripps La Jolla as America enters a new era in health care delivery

By Arthur Lightbourn

If you see a doctor in green surgical scrubs walking around Scripps Memorial Hospital La Jolla with notes pen-written on his right pant leg, chances are you're seeing the hospital's newly-elected chief of staff, Dr. Marc Sedwitz.

He jots notes on his pants because, as he puts it, "You can lose your Blackberry, but you won't lose your pants."

As you might guess, the stocky 57-year-old vascular and trauma surgeon is both busy and practical.

We interviewed him in the Schaezel Center medical library on the campus of Scripps La Jolla 10 days before he assumed his new responsibilities on the threshold of a new era in health care in America.

He is 5-foot-10, 180 pounds, with longish dark hair that has a tendency to get in his eyes. For recreation, he snowboards. He used to do a lot of running and basketball. "Now, there's just enough time in the day for running between the hospital and the office," he said.

Asked what would be his

responsibilities as chief of a 900-member medical staff as of Jan. 1 for a two-year term, he said they will coincide with those of the medical executive committee which are the credentialing of new physicians and the conducting the peer review process.

However: "With health care reform being in its nascent state," he said, "the medical staff is going to be responsible for a lot more of the issues of physician behavior, patient safety, and the ability for the hospital to acclimate to new crises in health care."

For 25 years, Scripps La Jolla has been North County's prime acute care emergency hospital as one of a network of six trauma centers serving San Diego County.

"As these changes occur in medicine," Sedwitz predicted, "this hospital will probably have more and more responsibilities and with that the chief of staff is going to be dedicated toward maintaining the physician excellence and patient safety."

"What we're going to see is a sudden change in how medicine is delivered. We are much more accountable in

terms of what are called quality parameters, how we distinguish ourselves from a good hospital to an excellent hospital; what we're graded on.

"Physicians have always been very, very good at being graded. They got 98s in high school, in college and medical school, but medicine now is expecting 100 percent. And what we live with is trying to minimize that 2 percent of complications, the 2 percent of people with extended length of stays, maintaining our excellence in a time when we are going to see certainly a change in what economic reimbursement is going to be for this.

"You can't take 47 million people and make them have insurance at a time when hospitals are full and not have an impact on how your hospital is run and how physician responsibilities are met," he cautions.

The solution, he believes, will rest with educating physicians and utilizing new technologies, including information technologies in how physicians get information from labs and X-rays and how they communicate their thoughts to other physicians.

Also, advances in technology will improve how hospitals will view and analyze data revealing whether or not they are doing a good job in terms of 'bundled' services between hospitals and their physicians to ensure the fair, equitable and collaborative distribution of reimbursements.

"Doctors will always do what they do best which is to care for people," he said. "The only question is how do we manage costs and who is going to determine what the rules are for doing it.

"Some of the medicines we give for cancer, for instance, cost thousands and thousands of dollars for a six-month increase in life expectancy. We still measure successful health by how long we live rather than quality of life. We have the conflict of our spiritual, emotional and definition of quality of life, with measuring it in number of years. That's why at the end of life it's so expensive in health care.

"Do we deprive someone



Marc Sedwitz, M.D.

Photo/Jon Clark

at the age of 80 or 90 an important operation for their heart or their brain or their back to improve the quality of their life knowing that their life expectancy is limited?"

Those are the types of ethical and social questions that we are going to have to address as a society, he said.

Born in New York City, Sedwitz was the elder of two boys in his family. He grew up in Bethesda, Maryland, where his father was an economist with the Organization of American States (OAS).

With thoughts of becoming a researcher, Sedwitz majored in biology at Haverford College, a Quaker college in Haverford, Pennsylvania.

Although he is not a Quaker, what he learned at the small 690-student college, he said, was a sense of community and the value of consensus, qualities that he hopes may prove valuable in his role as chief of staff in an era of change.

"Based on a consensus of a community, having different

opinions are always invited, but it is how you move forward to take different opinions and come up with a plan to do something that everyone can be responsible for," he said.

While on a sabbatical from Haverford College with one of his teachers at the University of Basel in Switzerland, "I decided being a physician wouldn't prevent me from being a researcher. Being a clinician and a scientist was a very effective combination."

He earned his M.D. degree from Boston University in 1978 followed by a residency in general surgery, New York Hospital/Cornell Medical Center, New York City, 1979-82; and a vascular surgery fellowship at the University of California San Francisco, 1983-84.

In San Diego, he began his career on staff at UCSD Medical Center before joining Scripps La Jolla and Scripps Memorial Hospital Encinitas in 1985 as a vascular and trauma surgeon.

At Scripps La Jolla, he is one of a team of five trauma surgeons averaging four to five trauma cases each day.

He defines trauma as "any significant injury produced by a fall, an accident, or by guns, knives or hanging."

One of his mentors used to say, there will eventually be a cure for heart disease and cancer, but there will never be a cure for trauma.

A good trauma surgeon, he believes, is fundamentally a skilled clinician and "the most general of generalists."

"What is called 'the golden hour' in trauma is the first 60 minutes where much of a patient's outcome will be determined by how quickly you can assess someone who comes in, sometimes unconscious and suffering from multiple injuries, and decide without even a laboratory value or clinical test, what you need to take care of that patient in the most expedient and successful way."

Often, lives will be saved; sometimes, not.

"Recently," he recalled, "there was a trauma that was actually a hanging of a 17-year-old boy. He sustained an anoxic (inadequate oxygen) brain injury and came in in a vegetative state. Brain dead.

"It wasn't really an exercise in the management of the health problem; it was the compassion that the nurses and the staff had for the family dealing with the death of one of their children.

"He was revived on a ventilator until a decision to let him go was finally decided by the family.

"We later had a letter from the family that was actually one of the most moving experiences for me in that it wasn't about what we did; it wasn't about operations or technology. It was the fact that we managed the end of life in a 17-year-old that was in his prime of life in a way that was acceptable and compassionate for the family.

"What they stated was their view of the hospital had changed; that we weren't about bricks and mortar and monitors, we were about people taking care of people."

And dying, he said, is part of taking care of people.

Quick Facts

Name: Marc Sedwitz, M.D.

Distinction: A vascular and trauma surgeon, Dr. Mark Sedwitz was recently elected to a two-year term as chief of staff of Scripps Memorial Hospital La Jolla. He has been on staff at Scripps since 1985.

Born: New York City, 57 years ago

Education: B.S. degree in biology, Haverford College, Haverford, Pennsylvania, 1974; ; M.D., Boston University, 1978; residency in general surgery, New York Hospital/Cornell Medical Center, New York City, 1979-82; vascular surgery fellowship, University of California San Francisco, 1983-84.

Family: He and his wife, Irene Miller, a marketing consultant, have been married four years. They have a blended family of three sons: Brian, 23, recent Georgetown University grad now working for Fanny Mae in Washington, D.C.; Tim, 21, a junior at Princeton University; and Mekenna, 18, a student at Halstrom H.S.

Interests: Snowboarding and reading

Recent Reading: *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives*, by Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler.

Philosophy: As Voltaire pointed out, every man is guilty of the good he doesn't do.