



Six Easy Lessons

Executive Director's Message



By Bill Sandberg

**Just when you think there's nothing more to be learned,
there's a lot to learn and to re-learn.**

Recently, I was asked to sit in on a focus group, led by California Medical Association Foundation staff, with some of our retired members. The purpose was to gain some insight into who, what, when, where, why and how physicians volunteer.

The Foundation is engaged in a study throughout California with the hope of finding and increasing opportunities for physicians to get involved and continue to make improvements in their communities.

It was a busy Monday for me and I wasn't really anxious to go. Besides, having spent all of my 31 working years in non-profit, organizations dependent on volunteers, I didn't think I would learn that much.

I was wrong, and I'm glad I attended. I relearned some long forgotten lessons.

The first physician had a penchant for writing. She remarked on how the deplorable state of our Old City Cemetery and her interest in medical history led her to write two substantial booklets (both can be found on our web site) and become involved in the restoration of the cemetery. *Lesson #1 ~ A personal interest can be easily translated into a uniquely valuable contribution.*

Another physician spoke about his life-long interest in trying to attain universal health care coverage. He is often the only physician in the room at meetings where this subject is the prime topic; he feels alone as an MD and wonders where the others are. *Lesson #2 ~ Sometimes volunteers can feel alone but they persevere out of a deep-seated moral commitment.*

A sub-specialist spoke of the rewards found in delivering primary medical care to the indigent. He recognized his medical limitations in this field of medicine but was appreciative of those other paid physicians and medical personnel who were there with him. Most of all he appreciated the predicament of his patients and saw real value in his work. *Lesson #3 ~ Volunteering can be a real learning experience when practiced in a supportive environment resulting in shared rewards for all concerned.*

Another remarked that he didn't want to make a long-term commitment to a particular program. Yet, he was actively involved on a non-profit board with an interesting mission. After all, he had worked a long, busy and demanding career and enjoyed the freedom to be in control of his own time. But if he was called for a one-shot project and felt he could help, he would be there. *Lesson #4 ~ Not all volunteers can, or want to, make a long-term commitment to any one program, but they are willing to help in the right situation at the right time.*

Another clearly articulated that his medical career had focused on finding solutions to problems in 10 seconds or less and that he had just not found the right volunteer opportunity. Yet, when he heard some of the others talk about their experiences, he discussed his own. *Lesson #5 ~ We can learn a lot from each others' experiences, and volunteers doing interesting things make the best recruiters.*

Finally, another said that using his medical training to treat the indigent was rewarding, but his other volunteer job ~ helping kids learn to read ~ was the most rewarding experience he had felt in many years. *Lesson #6 ~ Your own career is no indicator of what you might discover as a rewarding volunteer experience.*

Thanks for the lessons! And, thanks for the hundreds of you who volunteer for SSVMS and in the greater community, who teach children to read, staff food closets, ring Christmas bells, sell newspapers while wearing funny hats, and take on probably hundreds of other fascinating volunteer activities.

Oh yes, thanks for getting me to think about what I myself might do, now and when I retire.

bsandberg@ssvms.org

Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society
5380 Elvas Avenue #100 • Sacramento, CA 95819
916.452.2671 PH • 916.452.2690 FX • Email: info@ssvms.org

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