Joe G.N. “Skip” Garcia, M.D.

Joe G.N. “Skip” Garcia, M.D., first became interested in medicine at age 11, when he picked strawberries alongside migrant farm workers in coastal California. During the four summers that he worked in the fields, he saw firsthand the needs and health problems of this group of people with very limited access to healthcare.

“Being able to provide assistance to this population through medicine struck me as a pretty ideal thing to do and a good career choice,” Dr. Garcia says.

He arrived at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School in Dallas intending to go into family practice, but was drawn to the school’s strong internal medicine program and switched tracks.

At the University of Iowa, where Dr. Garcia was an intern and resident, Gary Hunninghake, M.D., influenced him toward a career in academic medicine, and later Asrar Malik, Ph.D., further encouraged him. It is a decision he’s glad he made.

Balance of Academic Life

In both his former role as Director of Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, and in his current position as Lowell T. Coggeshall Professor and Chairman of the Department of Medicine at the University of Chicago, Dr. Garcia has spent much of his time persuading medical students, house staff and fellows to choose academic careers as physician scientists.

“We’re at a crossroads in academic medicine,” he says. “There’s a critical shortage of physician scientists in many areas, including pulmonary medicine. One of the things I did successfully at Hopkins was to get our fellows to apply for career development awards.”

At the University of Chicago, Dr. Garcia is making it easier for fellows to go into faculty positions. “They need protection from excessive clinical duties while they get their academic careers fired up,” he says.

The main benefit of an academic career, Dr. Garcia says, is the balance it allows between one’s professional life and family. “Particularly in critical care medicine, your time is not your own. Academic medicine gives you the flexibility for the things that are important.”

Dr. Garcia says he has found that raising a family in an academic setting to be very rewarding. “It gave me a chance to coach my kids in basketball, baseball and soccer, from the time they were 6 until they started high school. If you’re in private practice, there’s barely time to attend one of your kids’ games, let alone coach their team.”

Importance of Translational Research

Dr. Garcia, a vascular biologist by training, is focused on studying the basics of pulmonary edema.

“We’re now working on some very novel and exciting strategies for reducing pulmonary edema in the critically ill, and understanding the genetic basis for pulmonary lung disease,” he says. “This is important not only for taking care of patients in the ICU, but also has implications for health populations in the context of bioterrorism and avian flu.”

“He has an enviable record of successfully competing for large grants including serving as the Principal Investigator for a National Institute of Health (NIH) Specialized Center of Clinically Oriented Research (SCCOR) grant on acute lung injury, and PI of a large genomics grant from the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute. "Translational research-combining research and patient care-is so important," he says. "Many new technologies have come into play, such as proteomic, genomic and genetic technologies, and physician scientists must become adept at using them."

Heading the Department of Medicine

Dr. Garcia’s transition from Director of Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine at Johns Hopkins, where he oversaw 60 people, to Chairman of the Department of Medicine at the University of Chicago, where he directs a staff of 200, has been smooth, he says. "It’s a job of greater complexity, but the basic principles that helped me succeed at Hopkins apply here."

ATS Immediate Past-President Sharon I.S. Rounds, M.D., notes that Dr. Garcia’s latest career move says a lot about his reputation in the field. "He’s one of the few pulmonologists who’s a Department of Medicine chair, and the chair of a very prestigious one at that," Dr. Rounds says.

ATS Involvement

Dr. Garcia has been involved in the Assembly on Pulmonary Circulation for many years, serving in many roles, including chair. He has focused on bringing vascular biology to the rest of ATS community and organizing symposia for trainees on translational research.

He has been active in career development for ATS members and has worked with Dr. Rounds on the Minority Trainee Awards Committee.

Dr. Garcia hopes the ATS continues to increase its commitment to funding research. "It’s tough getting funding from the NIH," he says. "It is absolutely key for the ATS to support young investigators in research careers."

On a Personal Note

Dr. Garcia recalls that one of the most satisfying aspects of his career was providing care to migrant workers as a volunteer physician in a migrant camp clinic near Kokomo, Indiana, one night a week while he was at the University of Indiana.

In his free time, he enjoys the opera, attending athletic events and playing basketball, tennis and golf.

"I found it interesting that I was able to play more golf as a division chief and as a chair than I ever was as a regular faculty member," he muses.

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