



Wyoming's WWAMI Dean



Dr. Larry Kirven

WYOMING'S WWAMI DEAN HELPS STUDENTS ACHIEVE DREAM

BY GAYLE M. IRWIN

When the WWAMI program needed a new Wyoming dean in 2013, Dr. Larry Kirven of Buffalo responded to the call. Planning to retire soon, Dr. Kirven reflected on his tenure.

"I've developed a strong camaraderie with the clinical deans in the other states, [but] seeing many of the WWAMI students come back to Wyoming to practice—that's been one of the biggest rewards for me," Dr. Kirven said.

Prior to becoming a clinical dean, Dr. Kirven practiced family medicine in Buffalo for more than 25 years. Although he enjoyed serving the community and experienced a busy practice, "by the mid-2000s, I got burned out," he said.

"You're on call 24/7, which takes a toll on your quality of life," he added.

One of the benefits of establishing a family medicine clerkship at his practice for WWAMI students in 2000 was getting a feel for medical education, he said.

"I wanted to expose students to the challenges and rewards of family medicine," Dr. Kirven said. "I really enjoyed working with the students, as did my colleagues."

Working with WWAMI students while practicing in Buffalo

led to assuming the clinical dean's role for all of Wyoming.

"I like being around younger people—they challenge you," he said. "They often ask questions, and I've had to look up the answers."

Health care changes in the state

Dr. Kirven has seen much change in health care in Wyoming over the years, including the implementation of electronic records.

"I find that electronic records have come at a high cost and have not added much efficiency," he said.

However, he's experienced a lot of positive as well.

"The availability of specialists has increased," he said. "It used to be we had to send people out of state to see a specialist. Overall there are more physicians in Wyoming, too. In Buffalo, for example, the number of doctors has grown from four to eight. You can practice and not be overwhelmed. That also makes it easier for patients to get care in Wyoming."

He admits, however, rural areas of the state still suffer from lack of medical doctors.

"It's a hurdle to get physicians into the more rural areas, and

not just in Wyoming—that's a problem nationwide," Dr. Kirven said. "The cost of care is a nationwide problem, too. The expense [of medical services] is a detriment and impacts the availability of care."

However, programs that are part of WWAMI at the University of Washington School of Medicine may help address some of those concerns.

TRUST and WRITE programs

TRUST, which stands for Targeted Rural Underserved Track, provides a connection between underserved communities in Wyoming, Washington, Montana, Alaska, and Idaho, health professionals in these states, and the medical education of WWAMI students. The TRUST program's emerging doctors go through a special curriculum that connects them with medically underserved rural communities. They are encouraged to enter primary care residency programs in family medicine, general internal medicine and pediatric medicine.

"We want to expose students to rural settings," Dr. Kirven said. "The program has been very successful."

After retiring as the Wyoming clinical dean, he plans to also continue his work with the WRITE program. WRITE is the acronym for WWAMI Rural Integrated Training Experience and was developed to help meet the needs for rural primary care physicians in the states served by WWAMI. There are multiple sites in WWAMI states, including four in Wyoming. In the WRITE program, third-year medical students learn how to treat a wide range of medical, surgical and psychological issues during a clinical clerkship at a rural primary care practice.

"We want to expose students to rural settings, and we have an opportunity to do that with the WRITE program," Dr. Kirven said.

Wyoming medicine, Wyoming born and raised

Born and raised in Buffalo, Dr. Kirven didn't consider a career in medicine in college during his early years, but instead thought more about it after graduating.

"My medical career came late for me," he said.

WWAMI didn't exist at the time, but there was a similar program to help Wyoming students get into medical school in return for a three-year commitment to practice in Wyoming. Dr. Kirven said. He returned to the University of Wyoming for pre-med and worked in Laramie as a CNA and EMT. He was accepted to Creighton University School of Medicine in 1978. After his graduation in 1982, he completed a three-year residency in family medicine in Spokane, Washington, and consid-

ered returning to Wyoming to practice.

"I looked at several places in Wyoming, including Gillette and Buffalo," he said. "At the time, I preferred Gillette because everybody knew me in Buffalo. However, I got a call from Buffalo, and because I did know the community, I made a last-minute decision and went back to Buffalo."

Not only did the community and the University of Wyoming influence him and contribute to his career, but so also did an organization that continues helping practicing physicians.

"The Wyoming Medical Society has played an important role in my career," Dr. Kirven said.

That same organization also advocates and assists other physicians in the state, including graduates from the WWAMI program who are returning to Wyoming to practice. Dr. Kirven is pleased to play a role in the future of medicine in Wyoming as well.

"We need to have affordable, accessible, high quality medical care in our Wyoming communities," he said. "I see a bright future for medical care in Wyoming with the younger generation of physicians from the WWAMI program that are taking over for those of us nearing the end of our careers."

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