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Community Involvement and Volunteerism

Committee on Health Care for Underserved Women

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This information should not be construed as dictating an exclusive course of treatment or procedure to be followed.

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Abstract: As professional and community leaders, obstetrician–gynecologists have unlimited opportunities to become involved in and have a positive impact on local, national, and international communities and organizations. Volunteering outside of daily work routines often revitalizes a commitment to medicine while serving as a much needed resource to the community.

As practitioners, obstetrician–gynecologists affect the lives of hundreds of women every year. As community members, physicians have the potential to influence thousands, even millions, of lives. Although some physicians may be reluctant to get involved in community organizations because of the perceived time commitment, others ask themselves how they could make a difference beyond their practice in the local community, the national community, and globally. Most obstetrician–gynecologists pursued their profession because of a commitment and passion for improving the lives of women, children, and families. As community leaders, obstetrician–gynecologists have the ability to inspire other people to be involved in supporting worthy causes and to truly make a positive difference in the community. The demands of training, clinical practice, and home life may make it difficult to know how to get involved in the community.

Volunteerism generally has been defined as time and effort devoted to helping others without regard for compensation (1) for charitable, educational, social, or other worthwhile purposes. In the United States between the years 2005 and 2007, the average volunteer rate was 27.2% per year. To put this in perspective, in 2007, approximately 61 million people dedicated 8 billion hours of volunteer service (2).

Using skills as an obstetrician–gynecologist, volunteerism opportunities for ACOG members are unlimited and some examples include: participating in hospital or university committees; participating in local, state, or regional public health committees; teaching in

the community; serving on an advisory board for a local health agency; serving on a board of directors for a nonprofit health organization; providing care at a free clinic; providing guidance to students who want to pursue medicine as a career; assisting in the design and implementation of research projects; mentoring; working to promote better state and local health care services; providing expertise for the development of a new school-based clinic or sex education curriculum; and providing expertise at a community health fair.

Great rewards can come to obstetrician–gynecologists who volunteer at the hospital where they deliver patients and operate. Undertaking efforts to participate in hospital committees that seek to improve the quality of care for patients and streamline services to improve efficiency can be beneficial. Improving care requires thoughtful input from knowledgeable clinicians who are willing to consider ways to enhance and change clinical practice in the best interests of patient care. Realizing the importance of participating in hospital quality committees or executive committees may increase the level of physician engagement and satisfaction.

Involvement in the community may extend to nonmedical areas. Improving safe walking paths; building safe housing; donating food, clothing, and shelter; or participating in other safety initiatives to help families are ways to volunteer and make a significant impact on the local community. All of these efforts directly or indirectly improve women's health.

Another form of volunteerism is philanthropy. Contributing to organizations that



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affect women's health, such as a women's shelter, may come in the form of a financial contribution or in the form of helping to organize or solicit donations.

Being involved in local chapters of national professional organizations may lead to opportunities for leadership at the regional and national level. For example, there are numerous ways to participate in activities of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG). Volunteering at the section and district level may include seeking nomination to become an officer, mentoring, or serving as a community liaison. At the national level, opportunities exist for serving on an ACOG committee or working on a specific project or program such as the National Fetal and Infant Mortality Review Program (www.nfimr.org).

Volunteering for international organizations also can include donating time and expertise or needed supplies, finances, and resources. Opportunities for volunteering internationally are diverse. The ACOG web site (<http://www.acog.org/goto/international>) and other international volunteer web sites provide many resources on volunteer opportunities.

The positive influence one could have in the community and nationally is a strong motivation for volunteering. The contributions of obstetrician–gynecologists to promote women's health or serve women's health causes are essential to the growth and development of many organizations. Sharing medical knowledge will increase their capacity to provide accurate information, thereby increasing the credibility of the organization. In addition, getting involved in nonprofit organizations often helps physicians realize their value in the community and the impact they can have on specific causes.

Making the commitment to get involved often is the most difficult aspect initially because it seems impossible to fit more into already overloaded schedules. However, being involved in an organization that contributes to the health of a community outside of daily professional activities can help recharge the volunteer as much as it helps the community. Working with committed volunteers and staff helps keep the energy and enthusiasm of volunteering vital.

It is important for obstetrician–gynecologists to consider the type of impact they would like to have on their communities and likewise the type of organizations or programs that might fit these goals. The next step is to contact either the organization's executive director or program director to express interest in volunteering, such as staffing an event, giving a lecture on a relevant topic, or leading a discussion about a specific issue. These initial encounters will lead to an understanding of the organization's mission and direction.

Volunteering outside of daily work routines often revitalizes a commitment to medicine while serving as a much needed resource to the community. The skills and training of obstetrician–gynecologists extend well beyond direct patient care. Obstetrician–gynecologists have the potential to make a significant positive impact on women's health in local communities, professional organizations, as well as the international community.

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