

“People watch too much *ER* and not enough *Marcus Welby, MD.*”

Dr. Sallie Rixey:
A family
approach to
improving
patient care

As Dr. Sallie Rixey sees it, contemporary medicine is in need of an image makeover. “Unfortunately today, people have watched too much *ER* on TV and not enough *Marcus Welby, MD.*,” she smiles, referring to the popular 70s TV series that featured a kindly family doctor.

Rixey should know. As the Program Director of the Family Medicine Residency Training Program at Franklin Square for the last nine years, she has been a tireless educator and advocate on behalf of one simple, proven premise—“It’s the relationship between the patient and the doctor that matters,” she explains. “And the more comprehensive your care is from that doctor, the better your care and your health are likely to be.”

“People still don’t realize that there is a well-trained doctor out there who delivers babies,” she says, “and who takes care of those babies and their parents and their grandparents, injects knees, does pap smears, biopsies skin lesions, makes home visits, and manages end-of-life care. So the question is, how do we inform the public that kind of doctor still exists?”

She pauses, then answers her own question: “We do that every day at the Family Health Center at Franklin Square.”

What exactly is family medicine?

Franklin Square is nationally recognized as one of the first and most highly regarded centers for training and practice in family medicine. Just three years after the American Board approved Family Practice as the 20th medical specialty in 1969, Franklin Square established its own Department of Family Medicine and opened the Family Health Center. As part of its mission, the Family Health Center also included a residency program to train new doctors to become family physicians.

But what is family medicine? In short, it's the only medical specialty that addresses individual care and wellness through the context of the entire family and their interactions. In addition, family physicians are trained to provide a broad spectrum of medical care regardless of the age or sex of family members or the nature of an illness.

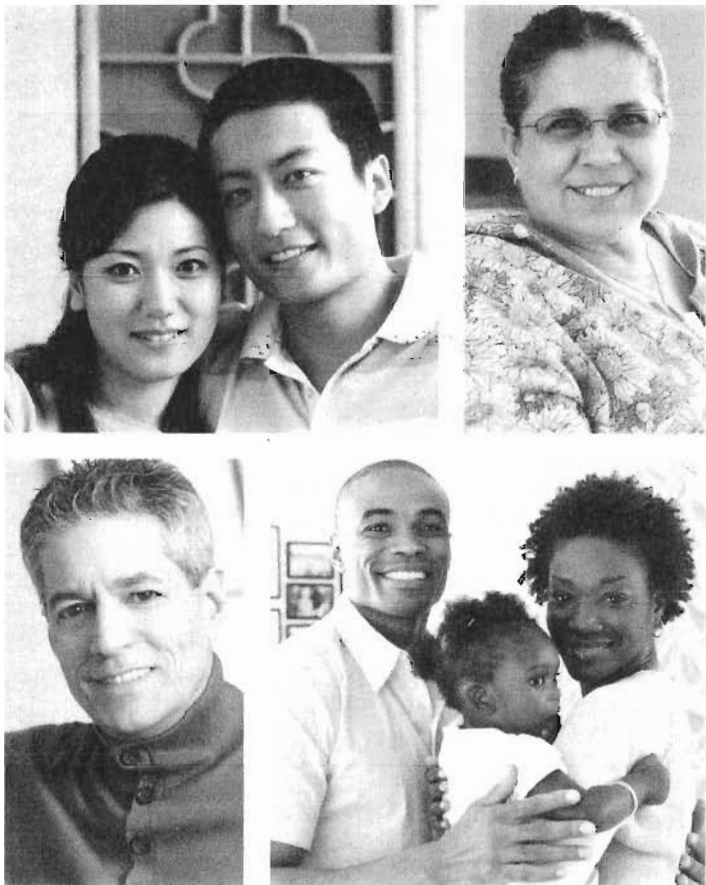
"The family doctor not only gets the 'big picture,'" explains Rixey. She also knows the details "because she's cared for the patient through many of life's changes." In addition, she has cared for other members of that individual's family. "Nothing can replace the trust that is established when this relationship occurs," she continues. "It is the knowledge and the trust that allow us to coordinate care most effectively should the need for a specialist arise."

In today's medicine, specialized care and their associated costs can quickly get out of hand. As Rixey explains, "In the U.S., we spend over \$8,000 per person for healthcare every year, more than twice that of any other country in the world. I have taken over the care of elderly patients who are seeing as many as 10 specialists and are on twice as many medications," she notes. "It is amazing what simplifying their care can do to improve their health and well being." At the other extreme, she continues, "patients with no doctor at all are overrunning emergency rooms, which also adds to the cost of healthcare in America." Family medicine can be a powerful tool in managing and even lowering the cost of health care, she believes.

Finding her focus

Interestingly enough, Sallie Rixey's first passion was not medicine but education. Following undergraduate school in the late 70s, she earned her Master's in Education through Teacher Corps (now Teach for America), which gave her the opportunity to teach middle-schoolers while working to improve their impoverished community.

Eventually, she did attend and graduate from the University of Kansas School of Medicine, where she also completed her residency. At the suggestion of a colleague, Rixey moved to Baltimore



Left: Family Health Center patients and families represent a wide range of ages and healthcare needs that are often interconnected. *Right:* Dr. Sallie Rixey and Dr. Michelle Cardona (right) take a break during a busy day treating individuals and families.

THE HUMAN SIDE OF HEALTHY

All in the family

Clinically, 38 year-old Kelly Perry is considered medically frail, having a combination of cerebral palsy, severe mental retardation, osteoporosis, asthma, and a G-tube. Although she requires constant medical care, her mother Cathy says, "We don't consider Kel's ailments a disability—it's just her stuff." But when their prior doctor retired a decade ago, Perry, a school administrative coordinator, conducted a thorough search before she met Dr. Rixey. "We fell in love with Sallie right away,"

Perry says. "She considers me the expert about Kelly's needs. That's so important to me."

Rixey is today the physician for most of Perry's

family. "We'd take the dog to her

if she let us," Perry laughs. □



soon afterwards, where she was hired and served as assistant professor of family medicine at the University of Maryland School of Medicine from 1982 to 1991. During her tenure there, she also was section chief for undergraduate education, where she developed an ambulatory family practice curriculum.

By the early 90s, Rixey was looking for a part-time position that would allow her more time at home with her two young children. Knowing of Franklin Square through rotations of Maryland medical residents there, she inquired and was hired as a part-time faculty member in the hospital's Family Medicine Residency Training Program in 1991. "I suddenly found myself in this great community hospital where people loved family doctors and valued what we did," she recalls. "It was wonderful!"

When she was appointed Program Director of the residency program in May 2000, Rixey was ready. One of her first efforts as director was to revamp the curriculum. "Family Medicine

training programs had not changed much over the last 20 years. It was time for a more innovative approach."

In addition to regular office hours every week throughout their training, the new curriculum, still in force and popular today, requires Family Medicine residents to spend six full-time months working in the Family Health Center—one month every semester for three years. These immersive experiences give residents the opportunity to practice and achieve competence in family medicine in a supportive atmosphere free of distractions.

A series of steps

Over the last nine years, Rixey says, the program has grown in scope and reputation. "We continue to attract amazing faculty, half of whom are graduates of the program," she says. "They are the best and the brightest former residents of the program—people who know this community like no one else."

The program succeeds in attracting a diverse group of talented residents from some of the top medical schools in the country, including the University of Maryland and Johns Hopkins University. These residents, attracted by the program's dynamic curriculum, are given a great deal of responsibility and outstanding instruction and supervision. They gain invaluable clinical experience through the Family Health Center's 35,000 patient visits each year, and many are proving to be high achievers themselves. Over the past several years, residents consistently have won awards from the American Academy of Family Physicians Foundation (AAFP). The AAFP also has awarded the program with seven research grants.

Giving back

For all of her accomplishments, Rixey feels that much of the program's success—and her own—is due to the support she has received at Franklin Square. "I have found that being able to have a family medicine residency program in this hospital, in this community, and as a part of MedStar Health is a real privilege," she says.

Citing "a commitment to the hospital's wellbeing and growth and to the community that we serve," Rixey has been highly active in a number of recent charitable efforts on behalf of the hospital.

Besides her individual contributions, Rixey helped to organize program residents to do a phonathon fundraiser on behalf of the hospital. "All of us called graduates of the program who were more than happy to contribute," she says. The entire faculty participated in fundraising events. Says Rixey, "We hosted one in the home of our chairman to talk about the importance of philanthropy and the new Patient Care Tower to the community." Rixey herself has served for the past two years on the hospital's Physicians' Philanthropy Partnership Committee to solicit the medical staff for contributions.

"When I talk to other program directors around the country, they stop and take notice when they hear about the support we receive from the hospital's leadership," says Rixey. "They can see that family medicine is valued here. That's why it's important for me to give back." □



Who's Your Doctor?
 Family Medicine
 Residency Program
 MedStar Franklin Square