Mission Possible: With Help From Our Friends

Douglas P. Zipes, MD, FACC
President, American College of Cardiology

During the past year, I have used the President’s Pages in this journal to discuss the issues and opportunities that I believe are the most pressing for the cardiovascular care professions and, therefore, for our patients and our College. Each month, as I considered different topics, I asked myself, “How does this idea relate to the American College of Cardiology mission of optimizing cardiovascular care and disease prevention?” Any topic that didn’t have a strong connection to this mission didn’t make the cut. From reaping what we sow in the advocacy arena to keeping an open mind about complementary therapies, and from online professional education to bioterrorism preparedness, the bottom line remains the same: They all affect how we deliver care to the millions of people who either have cardiovascular disease or are at risk.

Now, as I look back on nearly a year at the helm of the American College of Cardiology (ACC), an organization grounded in doing work that ultimately benefits so many, I feel a responsibility to acknowledge how our work gets done. Of course, first and foremost, all of our efforts—in education, in advocacy, in the development of guidelines and standards, and in quality-of-care initiatives—reflect the dedication and commitment of the membership. Through the years, the College has been honored by the enthusiasm and spirit of thousands of volunteer members who give of their time and talent to launch new undertakings and shepherd them through the various development stages, ultimately delivering programs, products, publications, and victories on legislative and other fronts. Crucial to all of these efforts have been hard-working and dedicated staff who labor behind the scenes, proffering boundless support of ACC activities and objectives.

My thanks go out to these groups, both for sustaining the College over time and for supporting the goals of my presidency. There is another group, however, that deserves acknowledgment here for, without their assistance, the College simply couldn’t achieve the great successes it has. They are our partners—the individuals and companies who believe in the College’s mission and help us fund initiatives that, collectively, lead to the achievement of that mission.

From the early days, the College has enjoyed the support and encouragement of countless people who share the ACC’s vision. Some have been the patients and family of members, many have been members themselves, and others have represented industries that also want to foster optimal cardiovascular health. As a result of their generosity, there is a long list of ACC accomplishments that are due in part to such generosity. The Annual Scientific Session, for example, which thousands of health care professionals attend every year for updates in their specialty, would not be what it is today without the support of our industry partners.

Another example—perhaps the most tangible of results related to donor and industry support—is that, in the 1970s, the College built Heart House. Over the years, we have held hundreds, if not thousands, of educational programs at the College’s headquarters in Bethesda, Maryland—just a short drive from Capitol Hill and the houses of many regulatory agencies. Heart House is the legacy of dedicated ACC members and other donors who had a vision of the College’s potential to help grow our specialty, support the learning of a vast and impressive roster of cardiovascular specialists, shape health care policy and regulation, and guide the development of standards for high-quality care. I cannot begin to name all of the individuals who contributed to the building of Heart House, but a few come immediately to mind—Drs. Harold J. C. Swan, Simon Dack, William Likoff, and George C. Griffith. Each of these members and their families saw past an empty tract of land down the street from the National Institutes of Health. They envisioned a way to meet the needs of cardiologists for years to come by providing a home away from home, a place they could go for advanced learning and opportunities to interact directly with experts in new and emerging areas of cardiovascular medicine.

Other members, including Drs. E. Grey Dimond, Dwight E. Harken, and Donald A. Dupler, shared the goal—in fact, they conceived it—of turning the ACC from a “college without walls into one with walls.” They mounted a campaign to make it happen, reaching out to charitable trusts, foundations, and corporations, infecting them with their enthusiasm and belief in the ACC’s purpose. I was honored to follow in the footsteps of these visionaries when, in 1997, Dr. Richard Popp, then president of the ACC, asked me to chair the first ACC Development Committee. Since then, the members of this committee (which is now chaired by Dr. Ben McCallister, who succeeded me in this position when I became president-elect of the College) have strengthened the College’s corporate relations program and established the new charitable-giving program through which individuals can support the Annual Fund, make a bequest, or arrange a special gift to further the College’s
work. The Development Committee spearheads efforts to raise funds in support of many of the ACC’s projects, such as our Guidelines Applied in Practice (GAP) initiative, the ACC-National Cardiovascular Data Registry™ (ACC-NCDR™), and ACCardio, our online professional education site.

These projects are crucial to the future of cardiovascular medicine. The visionaries I have mentioned (and others I may have neglected to mention) recognized that their College and their specialty were at an important juncture—that it was time to give the ACC walls and to create a place for cardiologists. I believe that we are fast approaching another such juncture—a crossroads in medical history, when a need must be met. Ironically, what we need now is not a building where we can go to learn; rather, we need a means to learn without the building or a particular set of walls. As I have discussed many times in these President’s Pages, discoveries with the potential to advance cardiovascular care are developing at lightning speed, and we are being overwhelmed with the task of keeping up. This decade’s vision—its Heart House—is ACCardio, an online learning-management and knowledge-delivery system that will allow health care professionals to obtain the cardiovascular information and continuing medical education credit they need, whenever they need it and from wherever they are.

I believe in ACCardio as enthusiastically as my predecessors believed in Heart House, and I hope to infect you with my excitement. I think that will happen when you attend ACC ’02 in March and take ACCardio for a test drive at ACC Central.

Another program that I am particularly excited about is a direct result of the benevolence of ACC supporters. The College’s career development and fellowship awards are aimed at helping young cardiologists to launch careers in research and teaching. As many of you know, there exist insufficient funds to support individuals who want to spend an extra year or two perfecting their research (either clinical or basic) or teaching skills or to help practitioners who want to make a career shift, such as returning to the medical center for more training in a certain area. We are all aware of the pressure to finish training and start earning a living. The career development and fellowship programs will ease that pressure and help provide the training that will ensure that we are replaced by very well-educated men and women who have the skill sets for a lifetime of important contributions to cardiovascular medicine.

All of the College’s supporters believe in the ACC’s overarching goals, but many have specific reasons for contributing. A member may want to honor a colleague or a mentor. A cardiologist’s spouse, sibling, or child may wish to pay tribute to his or her professional accomplishments. A patient may want to recognize a doctor who provided extraordinary care, or a family may wish to honor the compassion shown by a doctor who cared for a loved one. The ACC Foundation enables individuals to do all of these things while it provides cardiovascular specialists with the tools and training to be excellent mentors and caring physicians.

The College’s supporters offer their contributions quietly, not asking for or expecting any kind of public acknowledgment. The College, however, believes it is important to recognize its donors, both individual and corporate, and does so in myriad ways (unless, of course, the donor specifically asks to remain anonymous). In addition to acknowledgment on, for example, signs at the Annual Scientific Session and in ACC publications like this one, we have recently constructed a Donor Recognition Wall at Heart House (see above). Standing opposite the President’s Wall, which honors the legacy of the College’s founders and leaders, this wall pictorially tells the story of medical progress. The wall, which was unveiled in January, highlights, in relief, the names of those who have made gifts to the College since January 2000. It will stand as a tribute to their generosity for years to come.

The wall, this President’s Page, and the other ways the College recognizes donors are small tokens of our gratitude for their munificence. We will continue to demonstrate our gratitude to them in a bigger way, by relentlessly pursuing the mission of the College. Thanks to the help of our many friends, the mission is within reach.

Reprint requests and correspondence: Douglas P. Zipes, MD, FACC, Indiana University School of Medicine, Krannert Institute of Cardiology, 1111 W. 10th Street, Indianapolis, Indiana 46202.