Case 82

Paul B. Beeson Career Development Awards in Aging Research Program

The Commonwealth Fund, Hartford Foundation, Atlantic Philanthropies, and Starr Foundation, 1994

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Background. Americans over the age of sixty-five make up the nation’s largest bloc of health care consumers. And although their numbers are increasing faster than at any time in history, senior citizens are still usually treated by physicians with little or no special training in the biological effects of aging. Of the 125 medical schools in the United States, only thirteen require any coursework in gerontology, and fewer than 4 percent of all physicians have ever taken an elective on geriatrics.1

Between 1978 and 1993, three conferences of the Institute of Medicine (IOM) identified the paucity of geriatric specialists as a major problem in the American health care sector, and called for major new support of research and training in the field. Recognizing that “the greatest deterrent to physicians-in-training being exposed to geriatrics . . . is the shortage of research-based academic leaders and role models among medical school faculty,” two private foundations in the early ’90s sought to provide needed support. Beginning with a 1991 paper published by The Commonwealth Fund, these foundations—The Commonwealth, as well as the Atlantic Philanthropies and the John A. Hartford Foundation—discussed how best to draw talented physician-researchers into the geriatrics field.

Strategy. In the spring of 1994, the foundations announced the creation of ten national fellowships for research, teaching, and practice in aging and geriatrics. With an initial commitment of approximately $14 million, they set up the Paul B. Beeson Physician Faculty Scholars in Aging Research Program. The Program provides about ten new fellowships each year to promising medical school junior faculty members committed to pursuing a career in gerontology. The Beeson scholars are picked by an Advisory Committee of leading physician-scientists in the field, and the size of the award, up to $450,000 over three years, ensures that it is a major incentive. Each Beeson scholar has at least 75 percent of his or her time protected for research. This is meant to drive progress in the scientific study of aging, and to free promising faculty from the demands of clinical practice. In addition, each scholar is assigned a mentor from his or her institution, who assists in career advising and networking. Named for Paul B. Beeson, M.D., the distinguished medical professor who chaired the original 1978 IOM conference on “Aging and Medical Education,” the program is administered and overseen by two not-for-profit organizations: the American Federation for Aging Research (AFAR) and the Alliance for Aging Research.

Outcomes. To date, the Beeson Program’s foundation sponsors have spent over $46 million to give out 104 Beeson Career Development Awards. Competition for the awards has been stiff, with up to eighty applicants vying for the ten fellowships in any given year. Of the first group of scholars, those selected in 1995, 96 percent have since been promoted to tenured positions. This average for all ten classes of scholars taken together is 50 percent. According to Judith Salerno, Deputy Director of the National Institute on Aging, “[b]ecoming a Beeson scholar is like getting a halo. It has been a distinguished and well-recognized achievement and it gives researchers a step up unlike any other award.”

Impact. Many of the Beesons have gone on to receive significant acclaim. In 2003, for instance, not one, but two Beeson alums—Drs. Ashley Bush and David Holtzman—shared the American Academy of Neurology’s highest honor, the Potemkin Prize. Now, 93 percent of the Beeson alumni
train new researchers and practitioners in the field. Over the past ten years, “they have trained more than 700 students and faculty.” So not only has the Beeson Awards Program served as a major boost to a cadre of young experts, but its effects have rippled outward, leading more and more young medical students to receive more and better training in a field of medicine of enormous concern—not only to the elderly—but rather to all Americans who will one day join their ranks.

In 2000, the Starr Foundation joined the program as a major funder, which cleared the way the following year for The Commonwealth Fund to phase out its involvement. And in 2004, the National Institute on Aging (NIA) assumed responsibility for much of the program’s administration, committing additional funds that increased the size of the award to between $600,000 and $800,000 over a period of three-to-five years for each new scholar. As a result, the Program’s “financial future [is now] assured.” Atlantic Philanthropies, as well as the Hartford and Starr Foundations, continues to work with AFAR, the Alliance for Aging Research and NIA to ensure that the Beeson Program will continue to grow and enrich the field of gerontology for many years to come.

Notes

1192. Ibid.
1193. The program’s name has since changed to the Paul B. Beeson Career Development Awards in Aging Research Program.
1197. Ibid.
1198. Ibid.
1199. As Brian Hollander, MD, director of the Aging Program of the Atlantic Philanthropies, has said, “This program captures talented physician-scientists at a crucial point in their careers and encourages them to think of themselves as aging researchers. Since they are such high quality researchers, they have a ripple effect on other faculty and staff they train. As they take on leadership roles, they are having a tremendous influence on the field.” Ibid.
1200. Ibid.