

Promoting Community-Based Research Ventures

BY RHODA WEISS

Academic medical centers have long housed clinical research programs. But government cutbacks and expansion of programs into the community setting have forced some of these laboratory-based programs to seek new homes in community hospitals.

Community hospitals are also motivated to embrace clinical research. Many of these hospitals have a number of physicians on their staff conducting research, ranging from clinical trials to specific disease research. Although clinical research in the past was believed to be strictly the purview of the teaching centers, the line has become blurred as more academicians move into other settings to get more "real world" experience. Additionally, community hospitals are seeking to attract top specialists, many of whom have backgrounds in research.

With the opening of a new bone marrow transplant program, St. Francis Hospital & Health Centers in Indianapolis was in need of a laboratory to conduct bone marrow matching in patients and potential donors. This need was fulfilled in early 2000 when an internationally known research team and laboratory were recruited to its campus. The laboratory also offered the community a variety of other programs, ranging from tests for women at risk for miscarriages to research projects for individuals at risk for strokes and other vascular disorders.

To be successful, the new research venture needed to communicate with targeted audiences. The first element of the plan involved assessing the new laboratory's unique selling points—that is, what makes this lab different from others that perform similar tests. The good news was that the laboratory had developed a unique testing procedure for certain medical risk factors that went beyond the norm. The bad news was that physicians and others were unaware of the latest research findings that justified the new diagnostic tests. However, because the laboratory's work could easily identify patients at risk and recommend appropriate treatments, getting this information to physicians and the community was critical.



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St. Francis lacked an aggressive marketing and communication budget to promote this "niche" service, according to Fred Bagg, director of community relations and marketing. "Unfortunately, our marketing budget for the project was less than \$10,000," he says. "So much of the cost had to be absorbed in other budget areas. Also, no significant dollars were available for expensive mass media advertising."

The most important audience to reach was physicians. Much of the research conducted at the new laboratory was focused on finding out more about the link of certain antibodies with specific problems, such as miscarriages. The laboratory works with community physicians for "risk testing" of their patients and then collaborates with those physicians to develop appropriate treatment options to reduce or eliminate the risk. Therefore, the first strategy was to get the word out to physicians through written correspondence, newsletters, e-mails, educational programs, and one-to-one interaction.

Another early strategy taken by St. Francis was to develop multiple web site access points for the laboratory. As well as having its own web site (<http://www.hla-apla.org>), the lab was linked to the hospital's main web site and key search engines to ensure that individuals seeking information in this area would find St. Francis.

With such a complex subject, quality collateral material was a must. St. Francis created user-friendly brochures that were taken to physician offices by the laboratory's staff members. "The marketing piece needed flexibility to target specific groups such as other laboratories in the area, neurologists, rheumatologists, obstetricians/gynecologists, and other specialists with information on the benefits of comprehensive testing and unique capabilities of the St. Francis Lab," explains Bagg.

Nothing beats face-to-face communication for enhancing credibility and establishing dialogue. And no one could explain the unique tests and the reasons for doing them better than the

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research laboratory director, Dr. John McIntyre, and his staff. The St. Francis marketing and communication staff worked with McIntyre and laboratory personnel in organizing, encouraging, and supporting face-to-face meetings with specific physician groups, reference laboratories, and other potential referral sources. The physician and his staff also took advantage of his international reputation in immunogenic research. They responded to several invitations to give scientific presentations, including an international symposium. McIntyre's group published a number of manuscripts in peer-reviewed journals and 10 abstracts of data presented at professional meetings. McIntyre volunteered his time with a regionwide community education program called "Operation Stroke" and was provided media opportunities on local television and medical talk shows.

A number of other strategies were initiated that did not include expensive media advertising, says Bagg. A special open house was staged for the laboratory in September. Aggressive internal communication was featured in the hospital's employee and physician publications. Even inexpensive giveaways, including coasters and pens, were used to promote the laboratory's identity and phone number. An article on frequent miscarriages that highlighted the laboratory's research was featured in the hospital's community newsletter, which is regularly distributed to nearly 200,000 Indianapolis-area residents.

The communication staff successfully "pitched" stories to local, regional, and national media. McIntyre won the prestigious Hulman Health Achievement Award in Research, which brought the laboratory further exposure. In addition, a PowerPoint presentation has been developed, and the hospital continues to use a broad mix of communication tools to explain, promote, and market this unique and extraordinary laboratory. □

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