Nephrology has been a leader in the delivery of high-quality metric- and value-driven care for many years. Some of the reasons for this derive from the unique history and payment system for the care of patients with ESRD. Early in the ESRD program and continuing today, the Renal Network System focused on quality and safety. Simultaneously, the US Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) and its regulatory requirements drove improved outcomes. The US Renal Data System data set defined observational benchmarks, and the ability of dialysis organizations to execute processes focused on improving quality of care, helped move our subspecialty forward. The role of the medical director as a focal point in facility-driven quality care has been key to this evolution. In our opinion, this has been a unique feature of renal medicine compared with other specialties.

The roles and responsibilities of medical directors have changed and increased significantly since 1972, when Medicare entitlement was extended to those with kidney failure, irrespective of age (1). In October 2008, the CMS reissued the Conditions for Coverage (CfC) updating and clarifying the role of the medical director for the first time in 30 years (2,3). This update not only helped crystalize the role but expanded its importance as medicine evolves from a volume- to value-based system. Today, with >600,000 patients under the care of nephrologists, the role of the medical director has become even more critical in the management of this complex patient cohort (4).

Medical directors no longer practice in isolation but are integral members of the larger team of renal providers and are empowered by data and tools to drive improved renal outcomes. In this issue of CJASN, we begin a series on the role of the dialysis facility medical director. This series brings together content and experiential experts to provide a broad-based practical compendium for all medical directors, both experienced as well as novice. This series will serve as a reference and repository of the expertise of our colleagues, many of whom have helped build and shape the field of nephrology.

In this series, the authors practically interpret the CfC, and add their experience and expertise to better define the role and responsibilities of medical directors. In this issue, Drs. Maddux and Nissenson, who serve as the chief medical officers of the two largest dialysis providers in the United States, provide an overview of the evolving role of the dialysis facility medical director. In subsequent issues, experts in patient safety and quality, water treatment, and infection control will propel these subjects to the expectations of 21st century renal care. The broader responsibility of a single facility in an integrated renal care model will also be explored, defining the pivotal role of the medical director in bridging the fragmented, facility, renal clinic or office, and hospital environments in the world of integrated renal care. Discussions of the vexing problem of dealing with challenging patients and colleagues, the legal implications of being a medical director, and the medical director’s relationship to the regional ESRD Networks, will complete the series.

In this series, the authors have created a guide to one of the most important, challenging, and rewarding aspects of the nephrologist’s professional career, that of the dialysis clinic medical director. This is a critical, expanding, and exciting role. The success of the subspecialty of nephrology depends not only on properly executing the basic “blocking and tackling” as articulated in this series, but also on rising to the next level of performance required of true leaders in the field of renal medicine.

Disclosures
R.P. is employed by and is a shareholder of DaVita Healthcare Partners and is also a shareholder of Vasc-Alert LLC, Nephroceuticals LLC, and Roo LLC. J.L.H. is chief medical officer of Fresenius Medical Services and serves on the Renal Physicians Association’s Board of Directors and the Nephroceuticals LLC Scientific Advisory Board.

References

Published online ahead of print. Publication date available at www.cjasn.org.