The 2019 Fiscal Year Performance Report is now available for the Washington Medical Commission (WMC), and I’d like to devote this message to presenting what I think is important in the report. Our mission is to promote patient safety and enhance the integrity of the profession through licensing, discipline, rule making, and education. What follows is an assessment of our performance based on the data collected over the past fiscal year (July to June), as compared to data from the last 5 years.

**Licensing**
We currently have about 31,000 licensed physicians and 4100 licensed PA’s in the state. Last fiscal year, the WMC issued 2283 new physician licenses and 459 new PA licenses. Most of licensing occurs behind the scenes and is very routine. Only the problem applications are brought to the attention of commissioners.

For new license applications, our goal is to have at least 77% of all completed applications issued within 14 days. For the last 5 years, we have greatly surpassed that goal, completing 96% or greater within 14 days. That’s great; however, standard MD and PA applications currently take up to 12 weeks from when the WMC receives the application to licensure. The big hold-up is generally the required FBI background check, but other reasons for delay include transcript problems or other incomplete portions of the application. While our performance is currently on par with other states (Oregon takes 8-12 weeks from receipt of the application), the WMC has traditionally done considerably better. This increase in processing time arose from unexpected technical, personnel changes and from an increase in the number of applications. A number of steps have been taken to resolve these issues, so I don’t expect this to be a problem for much longer.

All bets are off for non-standard license applications. A panel of commissioners was created earlier this year to manage new applications that are not straightforward. Additional information is often required in order to decide if licensure is appropriate. Occasionally, the panel decides that it is not in the best interest of the residents of the state of Washington for the applicant to be licensed in this state, and the application may be denied.

The average time required to process delegation agreements for PA’s is 9 days and has been 8-9 days for the past 5 years.
Message From the Chair

Discipline
Complaints: Complaints to the WMC can originate from anyone. Last year, we received 1390 complaints, which is considerably less than the 1820 complaints the prior year. Complaints are assessed by a Case Management Team of commissioners, who authorized 46.9% of the complaints received for investigation. The rest were closed as being below threshold for many different reasons, such as billing complaints (which are outside of our jurisdiction) or communications problems (which are usually impossible to adjudicate).

Cases authorized for investigation: In the last 5 years, the percent of cases opened for investigations has varied from a high of 61% in 2017 to a low of 47% last year. While the WMC takes every complaint that we receive very seriously, we also recognize that opening an investigation is very hard on the Respondent (the MD or PA being investigated) and should not happen unless there is enough concerning information in the complaint to warrant opening an investigation. Investigations are thorough and can take a long time.

Number of days to complete investigations: Our goal is to have less than 23% of cases that are authorized for investigation to still be in the investigation stage after 170 days. We have surpassed that goal every year for the last 5 years.

Number of days from authorizing and investigation to close: WMC has a goal to close 77% of cases within 360 days. We have surpassed that goal every year for the past 5 years.

As you can see, this is not a quick process. While we recognize and would like to minimize the angst that an investigation can cause, our primary mission is to promote patient safety and to enhance the integrity of the profession.

Cases Resulting in Disciplinary Actions: Last year only 11% of authorized investigations resulted in disciplinary actions. We are required by law to consider prior complaints when deciding whether or not to authorize an investigation. Patterns of complaints and the number of complaints appear to be significant predictors of a disciplinary action. Practitioners with 10 or more complaints who received yet another complaint last year were disciplined 72% of the time. Practitioners with 5-9 complaints who received a complaint last year were disciplined 46% of the time. The WMC recognizes that some specialties are more likely to generate complaints than others. Over the last 10 years, 2.4% of licensed physicians in Washington received some form of a disciplinary action. Last year, the WMC only revoked one license. The most common disciplinary actions taken by WMC are educational. A smaller number are practice restrictions which can be temporary or permanent. The WMC commissioners and pro-tems who assess cases and deliberate regarding disciplinary actions are MDs, PAs and public members. They are peers evaluating complaints based on the information provided by the complainant, the respondent, witnesses and the medical chart. Due process is afforded those who disagree with the recommended actions.

Rule Making and Education
The opioid prescribing and monitoring rules went into effect on 1 January 2019. A large educational effort designed to educate clinicians about these rules was launched in July of 2018 and continues to this day. The WMC also sponsored a 2 day educational meeting last October entitled Engaging Patients: The Road Ahead. There were 119 participants who attended the sessions, which was a 21% increase over the year prior. Staff and commissioners spoke at a number of conferences around the country on topics such as engaging the public, your rights as a patient, sexual abuse, getting to know the WMC, process, regulations and other gems. The WMC won the Administrators in Medicine Best of Boards award. The WMC received several awards from the Federation of State Medical Boards (FSMB). Past WMC Chair, Dr. Warren Howe, received the FSMB John H. Clark, MD Leadership award, Mike Farrell, JD received the Award of Merit, and Amelia Boyd (WMC Program manager) received the Award of Merit.

Finally, I would also like to note the work of Washington Physicians Health Program (WPHP). They are completely independent of any of the licensing boards and commissions, although they do work closely with us. Their annual report is amazing, which is why I want to bring it to your attention. First, 95% of participants receive help without ever being known to the regulatory boards. That is ideal. 90% of participants are still working in their field at completion of their program and 80% of substance use disorder participants are relapse free at 5 years. There is no other program in the surrounding states that comes close to this. There are a number of other remarkable accomplishments by that organization described in their annual report. We are truly fortunate to be able to work with this dedicated group of professionals.