Warren R. Von Ehren: 1921–2010

Warren Von Ehren passed away December 17 in the Milwaukee airport on the way to his daughter’s home for the holidays. He died as he lived—traveling the world, going someplace interesting.

Von Ehren was the first full-time professional manager for the Wisconsin Hospital Association—a position he assumed as executive director in March 1960, to begin a 26-year era. Current WHA staff who were fortunate enough to have been at WHA during Warren’s tenure are Steve Brenton, George Quinn, Mary Kay Grasmick and Tammy Hribar.

He came from Bellin Hospital in Green Bay where he was the administrator.

Five years into Von Ehren’s stewardship, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Medicare and Medicaid laws. Few areas of government involvement in health care have created such continuing concern for hospitals.

In its early years under Von Ehren, WHA occupied office space at two downtown locations in Madison—the Washington Building and the Tenney Building.

As the decade moved on, it became clear that it was in WHA’s best interest to build its own facility, leading to the decision to buy land on Madison’s west side.

Ground was broken in 1970. The building was completed and the move-in took place in June 1971, with the official dedication that September.

As the 70s began, a new phenomenon surfaced….in Wisconsin and throughout the nation. It was the early awareness of health care costs and the desire to monitor and control them.

Also during that period, health care was rapidly becoming a more politically-sensitive issue.

In Wisconsin, the growing concern by government and the public over health care costs lead to the creation of the Wisconsin Hospital Rate Review Program. It was started in 1972 as a joint project of the Blue Cross of Wisconsin and WHA. In 1976 the State of Wisconsin became the third partner, at a ceremony with Governor Pat Lucey.

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Statewide Health IT Network Plan Gets Final Approval
Organizations to Begin Implementing the Plan in Early 2011

The development of a statewide electronic health information exchange (HIE) network and services is moving ahead now that Wisconsin’s strategic and operational plan has received final approval from federal officials. Under the plan, the Wisconsin Statewide Health Information Network (WISHIN) will be responsible for implementing the plan and serving as the governing body for statewide HIE. The Wisconsin Health Information Exchange (WHIE) will act as WISHIN’s technical manager under a contract with WISHIN and provide near-term technical assistance to the state’s health care providers and hospitals that want to participate in the HIE network.

WISHIN is a non-profit organization formed by WHA, the Wisconsin Medical Society, the Wisconsin Health Information Organization (WHIO) and the Wisconsin Collaborative for Health Care Quality. WHIE is a non-profit membership organization that has implemented a system of HIE among hospital emergency departments in Milwaukee and works to develop and promote health information exchange technology and services to improve coordination of care and population health.

“We can now make the statewide exchange of medical information a reality, helping our health care providers access the right information at the right time and provide the very best care for their patients,” said Karen Timberlake, Department of Health Services (DHS) Secretary. “This is another critical part of Wisconsin’s efforts to make constant improvements in health care quality for all state residents.”

“WHA and the other WISHIN founding organizations are committed to carrying on the good work begun by DHS and the state WIRED for Health Board,” said WHA President Steve Brenton. “WISHIN will work to position Wisconsin health care providers for compliance with HIE-related meaningful use regulations.”

Brenton said that with secure messaging services, more health care providers will be able to electronically receive electronic lab results and clinical care summaries from providers not associated with the same clinic or health system. Research has shown that these steps reduce medical errors, reduce administrative costs, improve care outcomes, and save time for both clinicians and patients.

Wisconsin providers are expected to receive between $500 million and $800 million in federal incentive payments to help with the cost of implementing or upgrading electronic health records systems. Wisconsin is receiving a total of $9.4 million for the development and implementation of its health information exchange plan as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), the majority of which is earmarked for implementation and technical operations of an HIE network.

WISHIN will be led by Joe Kachelski, formerly vice president of WHA Information Center. WISHIN’s offices will be housed at WHA’s headquarters in Fitchburg.
The Usual Suspects Offer Up Lump of Coal

A far left leaning “think tank,” funded by labor unions and liberal foundations (tax exempt by the way) has emerged once again this year to pronounce that the hospital property tax exemption be abolished and the resulting revenue windfall be available to local units of government who are currently “deprived” of the funding stream.

The Institute for Wisconsin’s Future, whose Board is comprised largely of labor union officials and self-described “community activists,” issued the report “Too Many Loopholes: How to Turn Property Tax Exemptions into Revenue for Local Governments” this week. The group’s press release garnered some press attention despite the fact that almost identical press releases have been issued in the past. That fact went unnoticed by reporters seeking “news” on a slow news day. Mark your calendars, the group can be counted on to issue this same report one year hence.

According to the Institute, Wisconsin’s “massive” hospitals along with “expensive senior housing complexes” are the biggest culprits. The group also calls out real estate speculators “who engage in fake farming” in order to gain agricultural property tax status. The Institute staff suggest that the hospital exemption alone is worth over $128 million in lost revenues that otherwise would be available for “deprived” locally delivered public services.

A natural and strong defense of our community hospitals’ tax exempt status can be found at www.wiServePoint.org/Documents/2010CBreport.pdf. But since much of the report’s focus is on local services (police and fire protection, road maintenance and sanitation, etc.), perhaps we should instead spotlight a community hospital service that is a financial black hole (far deeper than $128 million annually), subsidized through other hospital revenue streams that might otherwise be used to pay property taxes—the hospital emergency department. Might the Institute support the notion that local governments assume funding of emergency health care services, including the care of indigents presenting themselves in EDs? And while we are at it, what about providing behavioral health services, a current statutory responsibility that many local governments have walked away from?

Next year’s budget battles and the certainty that there will be no increases and perhaps cuts in state support for local governments means we’ll see more calls coming from the Institute, local officials and public employee unions calling for the repeal of the community hospital tax exemption.

Happy holidays and Christmas blessings to all...

Steve Brenton
President
The Rate Review drama unfolded monthly in meetings at the Blue Cross office in Milwaukee. Behind the scenes, countless hours of WHA member and staff time were devoted to discussing and negotiating a seemingly endless array of issues.

As the eighties moved toward its midpoint, Von Ehren signaled his intent to retire.

“Oliver Wendell Holmes once said that retirement reminded him of a horse race,” said Von Ehren, an admirer of the great lawmaker and poet. “He said, ‘Horses don’t stop at the finish line; they canter for awhile.’ That’s what I’d like to do—canter for awhile.”

After retiring from the Association, Warren and his wife Mary traveled the world, and for many years Warren worked on a part-time basis for the UW School of Medicine. He was also an active Rotarian.

Mix youthful enthusiasm with passion, perspective and the presence to accept advice, and you have Warren’s philosophy on life. How did he acquire it?

His career in hospital administration began in the United States Army, whose ranks he joined shortly after earning a Bachelor of Science degree at Northwestern University in 1942.

“I had been a graduate student at the University of Illinois-Urban, planning on earning my doctorate in biology and going into teaching and research,” he explained. With experience in biology, joining the 13th General Hospital and doing lab work seemed a natural thing.

After that, he was selected to attend Officer Candidate School at Camp Barkley, Texas. He graduated from OCS in June, 1943, was commissioned second lieutenant and was assigned to the 98th General Hospital in Fort Jackson, South Carolina. Thereafter, he spent 22 months in England, France and Germany.

“The Army introduced me to the whole idea of hospitals and health care,” he commented. “It changed my whole direction.”

While in the Army he met Mary, an Army nurse, who would become his wife of 60 years. They had two children together, Penny and Daniel.

Upon returning to the states, Von Ehren acquired an appointment to teach freshman biology at Northwestern University in September, 1946. That summer, he began his first job with the Veterans Administration Hospital in Hines, Illinois. And there he met his first mentor, Dr. Edward Leveroos, a flight surgeon from Superior, and the hospital’s medical director.
“We became very good friends,” said Von Ehren. “He’s the first person who really asked me, ‘What are you going to do with your life?’ I told him I wanted to earn my doctorate and then teach. He advised me, instead, to stay in the hospital field, since it was the up-and-coming thing. But I had to make my own decision.”

As a result, Von Ehren left the VA hospital, taught biology for the semester, and quickly decided that teaching wasn’t his calling. Hospital administration held a greater interest, so he enrolled full-time at Northwestern in the master’s program.

While at Northwestern, he also worked for the American Hospital Association in Chicago. After graduation, he served as assistant administrator at Bronson Methodist in Kalamazoo, Michigan, from 1949 to 1951. His boss, William Perdew, was a Methodist minister, who served as the hospital’s administrator.

“Perdew had no business background but he was superb. He knew how to handle people, to get them to work together, to realize their full potential as human beings. He was my first true example of what a hospital administrator should be.”

Von Ehren had great admiration for Perdew, who, though a perfectionist, wasn’t the kind of person to look over one’s shoulder.

“He made suggestions, but left it up to the individual to work it out,” says Von Ehren. “He always followed up and pointed out what you had done wrong, but never vindictively. He was critical but in a constructive way.”

In 1951, Von Ehren became administrative assistant for the AMA’s Council on Medical Education and Hospitals. He worked there until 1953 when he moved to Green Bay, where he was Bellin Memorial Hospital’s administrator for seven years.

“It was the first time I was really on my own. Now that I think about it, it was presumptuous to think I could run a hospital at age 32.”

When he arrived at Bellin, the budget was $500,000 to $600,000 annually; when he left in 1960, it was in the millions.

“At Bellin, I learned that the ‘Buck Stops Here.’ The real art of administration, I found, is getting people to work together. You must select the right people and allow them to work on their own—within the parameters you set. You must give them the freedom to make their own mistakes, but to learn from them as well.”

During his tenure at Bellin, a building program added 75 beds and provided new ancillary services. In 1955, under his leadership, a three-year diploma school of nursing was established.

“I was too young to really stop and reflect on the responsibility,” recalled Von Ehren. “If I had, I might have gotten cold feet. I had that youthful enthusiasm—which is great, and there ought to be more of it; I really plunged ahead.”

Plunging ahead was a way of life to Warren Von Ehren and with all of his experiences—the Army, various hospitals and career decisions—he developed a philosophy that reflected it.
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“If I were on a desert island and had a choice of two books to take with me, I would choose the Bible and the collected works of Shakespeare.” he reflected when he was interviewed in 1986 as he was retiring from the Association. “The Bible—even non-religiously speaking—is a guide to life. It’s a differentiation between right and wrong; it’s the responsibility of human beings. The whole distillation of life is contained in those two writings, no matter who wrote them.”

One specific piece of Biblical wisdom Von Ehren admired is found in 2nd Timothy: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

“Each person must do the best he or she can,” said Von Ehren, though he didn’t claim to be a Biblical scholar. “I believe I have fought the good fight through my life—I have enjoyed what I’ve done. I’ve set things out for myself and I have kept the faith.”

He also felt we should be our brother’s keeper.

“Some people can’t take care of themselves, concerning health care; food—anything,” he said. I feel it’s the responsibility of a civilized society to care for these people.”

Always a strong advocate of striving to do your best, he recognized that large scale changes are not always within reach.

“There are people who have had big influences,” he pointed out. “Robert E. Lee led the Confederacy; Lincoln preserved the Union; FDR got us out of the depression; and Reagan, I feel, has instilled more self-respect within the American people.

“None of us probably will ever achieve gigantic reforms. But we can do little things, like serve as mentor for someone. That’s not a big thing, but it offers the opportunity to touch some personally.”

While Von Ehren developed a unique philosophy of his own, he also held Abraham Lincoln’s in high esteem.

“Lincoln set goals for himself,” said Von Ehren. “His whole direction was to preserve the Union, and I have the utmost admiration for that.

“Lincoln became the champion of the downtrodden, the disadvantaged. He was a very moral person, interested in seeing that the ‘right’ thing was done. He fought a good fight, finished the course he set out for himself, and he kept the faith.”

Now we can say the same thing about Warren R. Von Ehren. He fought the good fight, he finished the race, and he kept the faith.

Rest in Peace, Warren. You will be missed.

Warren’s family is planning a memorial service in Madison sometime in February.

“WHA was fortunate to have Warren as its leader and many staff including myself treasure the memory of working with and for Warren. The success of the modern day WHA is a lasting legacy of his vision and leadership.”

Steve Brenton
WHA President
2002-present

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“I was Chairman of the WHA in 1982 while Warren served as President. Warren was like the father figure of WHA and without him, I think the Association may have taken a different turn. He made a difference in society, in the hospital association, in our state and maybe even a broader range than that. Not many people can say that—and Warren would never say it about himself. No one ever met a more honest or honorable man. He was well-respected, very young at heart and had infinite patience. He was a good man.”

Lowell Miller
WHA Chair, 1982
Retired Administrator, Memorial Medical Center, Ashland

“Warren hired me in 1976, and I spent the next 20 years with WHA, before taking early retirement in 1996. Warren was a manager who let you know his—and the organization’s—goals, then stepped back and gave you the freedom to accomplish them.

As health care has changed in America, WHA also has gone through a number of significant changes. But it was Warren, as its founding executive in 1960, who set a course for 26 years that helped WHA evolve into one of Wisconsin’s most respected and influential trade associations.”

Al Chechik
Vice President, Communications & Education, 1976-1996

“Warren Von Ehren was an outstanding leader of the Wisconsin Hospital Association for many years. I had the privilege of knowing Warren for many years in serving as President of Community Memorial Hospital in Menomonee Falls. I had the added privilege of working with Warren when I served on the Board and as Chairman of the WHA Board. The greatest tribute I can give Warren was his unwavering commitment to hospitals throughout Wisconsin and the patients they served. Whether it was working with the Legislature, business leaders, or the many advocacy groups related to health care, his bottom line was always what was best for our patients. On a personal level, whenever I had a question, all I had to do was pick up the phone and Warren was always there for me. He was a colleague, a mentor, and a friend. He will be deeply missed.”

Bob Drisner
WHA Chair, 1983
Retired President, Community Memorial Hospital, Menomonee Falls

“Warren Von Ehren was a giant in the health care community of Wisconsin. From his first leadership at Bellin in Green Bay to his 26 years as CEO of WHA, he always thought of the patients hospitals served and how the broader policy issues would impact them. He personally touched many in this state but especially me and the other staff at WHA which very much looked upon him as a father figure.”

Bob Taylor
WHA President, 1986-2001