

A BARD FOR HEALTH EQUITY LEADS FAMILY MEDICINE AND COMMUNITY HEALTH DEPARTMENT



Richard Wender, MD'79 is in his element. “COVID virus has exposed unjust disparities,” he sings with gusto to the virtual audience on the other side of his computer screen. “We join as one to raise our voice as NCCRT . . . We will screen you. We will screen you.” Anyone fortunate enough to attend the annual meeting of the National Colorectal Cancer Roundtable can look forward to a musical performance by the Chair, and this year’s virtual meeting was no exception. “We Will Screen You” was Wender’s adaptation of *Ragtime*’s “Make Them Hear You” to reaffirm the medical community’s commitment to providing preventive care during the COVID-19 pandemic. If Wender had not become a professor and physician, he might have taken his lyrical prowess to the stage.

Broadway’s loss is Penn Medicine’s gain. As Wender settles into his new role as chair of Family Medicine and Community Health in the Perelman School of Medicine, he has already made an impression with his quick wit and empathetic nature. After joining Penn in August 2020, he spent his first

several months on the job scheduling one-on-one conversations with every faculty member and nurse practitioner in the department. “I’m very much a believer in creating a loving, supportive culture,” he says.

Prior to joining Penn Medicine, Wender served for 12 years as chair of Family and Community Medicine at Thomas Jefferson University, where he helped catalyze the creation of the Division of Geriatric Medicine and a Palliative Care program. Wender also served as the first ever Chief Cancer Control Officer for the American Cancer Society. As his job titles and areas of responsibility have changed, the themes of health equity and social justice have permeated his life’s work.

Wender joins Penn Medicine at what he calls an “extraordinary moment in health care,” a confluence of events that has exposed the gaping inequity in health access and outcomes. “In an environment of national disunity and racial injustice arose a pandemic that has not only exposed disparities but helped people understand how they came about,” he reflects.

Wender has long pointed to social determinants of health—factors like household income, educational attainment, and workplace safety—to explain why certain populations experience worse health outcomes than others. “What we’ve now realized is that structural racism is one of the most important social determinants of health,” he says.

An inextricable link between primary care and the goal of equity are at the core of his commitments both to growing Family Medicine and Community Health and to working with other departments within Penn Medicine to expand primary care access in West Philadelphia and beyond. “We have a crucial role to play as an anchor institution in our city and neighborhood,” he says. Yet when it comes to social determinants of health, Wender also sees Penn Medicine’s role as one voice in a larger chorus. “Health care providers, try as they might, can’t carry the act alone.”

He is enthusiastic about taking the stage to play his part. “One of the primary reasons I came to Penn Medicine is because my new colleagues are deeply committed to grappling with issues of social justice,” he says. “The holistic pursuit of health equity is in their DNA.”

— Ashley Rabinovitch