

# INTRODUCTION

## **Policy Forum:** *Arthritis in North Carolina*

The aches and pains we feel when we are younger are just a hint of the kind of serious pain and disability that can accompany arthritis at a later age. Arthritis is a term that describes more than 100 different specific diseases, the most common of which are osteoarthritis, fibromyalgia, and rheumatoid arthritis. In North Carolina alone there will soon be more than 2 million adults with doctor-diagnosed arthritis. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention predicts our state will experience a 40% increase in the number of adults with arthritis by 2030. Nationally, arthritis is now the leading cause of disability in the United States.

The impacts of pain and activity limitations on the lives of people with arthritis can extend well beyond the direct effects to include psychological distress, pressure on family and work life, and diminished ability to cope with adverse events. Fortunately, there are many new interventions and treatments for arthritis patients. Several articles in this issue of the *North Carolina Medical Journal* highlight therapeutic approaches to arthritis including physical activity, surgery, and pharmaceutical options. For some types of arthritis, effective treatments are limited, but there is promising research underway identifying new mechanisms to treat and prevent the disease. With this new information, North Carolina must address its rheumatology workforce shortages, and as the need for care grows, so must the capacity to use new interventions and treatment methods.

Population-based prevention programs have the potential to help alleviate future problems with arthritis. Obesity and arthritis are closely linked, thus obesity interventions and prevention programs could play a critical role in reducing the risk of arthritic diseases while concurrently addressing other serious chronic diseases aggravated by excess weight. North Carolina also has an invaluable source of research and information in the Thurston Arthritis Research Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This issue of the *Journal* is an avenue for disseminating some of the good work being done there.

The National Arthritis Action Plan provides overall guidance for public policy on arthritis prevention and control. The United States Bone and Joint Decade is part of a global plan to set guidelines and measurable objectives in the treatment and prevention of musculoskeletal conditions. These two initiatives outline strategies to reduce the burden of arthritis and to improve future outcomes. We know the direction in which to go, and this issue of the *Journal* is part of an overall effort to spread the word about what we have to do to conquer arthritis and how we need to do it.

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