A RESIDENT'S BEST FRIEND

HOW MARLENE COOPER WATCHES OVER 1,200 RESIDENTS AND FELLOWS

BY CHUCK STARESINIC



Marlene Cooper

JEN URICH

After the euphoria of Match Day has subsided, reality will eventually set in for the new resident assigned to a University of Pittsburgh–affiliated teaching hospital. First, a small dose of reality arrives as a 1-inch thick packet of forms, contracts, memos, and guidelines. There are regulations, recommendations, salutations, and exhortations. Health insurance, life insurance, malpractice insurance, and disability insurance forms. The noncitizen will need a J-1 visa, unless of course the particular situation warrants an H or an O visa.

If any of this paperwork causes confusion (and why wouldn't it?), the Loeffler Building at the corner of Forbes and Meyran is the place to sort it out. It may be a monochromatic location, but the double glass doors at street level mute the roar of traffic, and when you climb the stairs and enter the Office of Graduate Medical Education (GME) you are greeted by an unexpectedly musical sound. This is more than a few discordant tinkles from a door chime. It's as if someone left a xylophone out in a hailstorm. It's the sort of sound that accompanies magic.

The person most likely to greet you is the executive director of UPMC Health System's GME, Marlene Cooper, whose office door is usually open. She only has to look up from her desk to bestow a welcoming smile. The wind chimes are an improvised security system, hung on the door long before they were made to lock automatically at five o'clock, but Cooper and her staff have grown to like the chimes, and so they have kept them.

Cooper calls this the human resources office for more than 1,200 residents and fellows—physicians training to be specialists in surgery, obstetrics/gynecology, pediatrics, and other Pittsburgh programs. "We do everything for them," she says. "Licensure application, visas, payroll, benefits, program accreditation—"

Ignazio Marino made the first of many visits to this office in 1990, when he left Italy for a transplant fellowship at Pitt. Over the course of several weeks, Cooper successfully walked him through the process of getting his credentials in Pennsylvania. "She understood how stressful the entire application process and its timing was for a young foreign surgeon who had just decided to bet everything on a challenging adventure far away from his home country," he says.

Marino returned to Italy as the director of the UPMC–affiliated transplant center, Istituto Mediterraneo per i Trapianti e Terapie ad Alta Specializzazione, in Palermo, before recently moving on. He has never forgotten how Cooper personally checked with her Harrisburg contacts on a November afternoon when she knew a decision had just been levied on his status: "She immediately paged me because she knew how anxious I was."

Cooper became the director when the residency programs were consolidated in 1986, and she quickly proved her worth. She noticed that residents often worked at hospitals outside the system, yet their salaries always came from UPMC. Cooper began tracking every resident's hours; then she picked up the telephone, called each facility, and in her always cheerful voice said, "Hi. We're sending you an invoice for the services of these residents." And she did, every month. She tells the story with a little embarrassment now, laughing and clapping both hands over her mouth to hide a childlike smile.

Now she tracks hours for different reasons. Starting next year, no resident may exceed the maximum number of scheduled hours set by the Accreditation Council for GME. Cooper is identifying residencies struggling to cut hours so that those who design the curriculum can help bring the programs into compliance.

Since they moved here in 1977, the Coopers have found Pittsburgh a wonderful place to raise children. But if it were up to Cooper's husband, the couple would be living elsewhere now that both children are grown. He might have accepted that job offer in California. They have stayed in Pittsburgh for her. "I won't go. I'm content here in Pittsburgh," she says in a voice both happy and stubborn. "It's a wonderful city, and I like what I do."

Everyone involved with the residency program can breathe a big sigh of relief. ■