Profiles in Simulation: Dr. Joe Lopreiato
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Simulation as the Rebellious Teenager

Joseph O. Lopreiato, MD, MPH, CHSE, brings a rare background to the field of simulation in healthcare, even more so considering that he becomes the president of SSH this month.

He is a general pediatrician, a retired officer in the U.S. Navy, and the Director of the Val G. Hemming Simulation Center of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences located outside of the city of Washington, DC.

How did all of those various areas of training converge into the current SSH President?

Lopreiato attended Seton Hall University and then medical school at Georgetown University. To assist with medical school expenses, he joined the U.S. Navy and would later train as a pediatrician at what is now known as the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.

It may not seem obvious, but pediatricians are needed in the U.S. Department of Defense Healthcare system to care for the more than two million children of service members on active duty and those who have retired from active service.

His start in healthcare simulation began as part of his Master of Public Health degree in 1997. He created a study in which trained parents and their children (incognito simulated patients or SPs) were seen in the pediatric clinic by postgraduate doctors. The SPs assessed the performance of the doctors using a checklist. He used this method of simulation to demonstrate that a new curriculum for health maintenance visits actually improved the quality of the visit.

Lopreiato would spend 31 years as a commissioned officer in the U.S. Navy, serving on ships including the USS INCHON, and the hospital ship, USNS COMFORT. He was deployed as a general medical officer at posts including Panama, Norway and Lithuania during the 1980s and 1990s.

Following a fellowship in Academic Pediatrics, he was assigned as the pediatric program director at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and was later asked to serve as the director of the Uniformed Services University’s simulation center. He introduced
simulation modalities to include mannequins and task trainers into the post graduate training program. That was in 2003, and he continues to serve as the director of the 30,000 square foot (10,000 square meter) simulation facility incorporating SPs, mannequins, task trainers and immersive virtual reality.

He looks at simulation through the lens of a pediatrician.

“If simulation were a patient, it’s probably in late adolescence right now,” he said. “It was born in the 1960s with standardized patients, had its infancy in the 1980s with the development of mannequins, and from the 1990s on has gone through a rapid growth spurt.”

You might say now simulation is a rebellious teenager aiming to strike out on its own. “We’re trying to find our own way in the world as an independent specialty.”

With respect to SSH, Lopreiato says, “I’m totally humbled and honored to be president of the Society. I can’t say I ever expected this.”

His priorities will be to continue what has become a tradition of servant leadership: listening to members and enhancing the value of membership, advocating for simulation methods, and ensuring that SSH is delivering valuable products to members and to the global healthcare community.

And he’d be remiss without acknowledging a motivating force not only in his career, but his life: wife Cindy of 36 years and sons Joe Jr. and Nicholas, who are also both physicians in the US Navy. And he is the very proud grandfather of Domenica, 2.