

Meet APMA President Sylvia Virbulis, DPM

Her passion is podiatry.

On Saturday, March 18, Sylvia Virbulis, DPM, was installed as APMA president during the association's House of Delegates meeting. Dr. Virbulis practices part-time in her private practice of more than 30 years and part-time at the W.G. (Bill) Hefner Salisbury Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center, where she is now in her 17th year. She remains active with the North Carolina Foot and Ankle Society (NCFAS), where she served in many roles, including NCFAS scientific chair and president. Dr. Virbulis was simultaneously active on a variety of APMA committees. She was a delegate from North Carolina to APMA's House of Delegates and ultimately was chief delegate for several years. She was elected to the Board of Trustees in 2012.

Dr. Virbulis completed her undergraduate degree at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, MI. She received her DPM degree from the Dr. William M. Scholl College of Podiatric Medicine and completed her surgical residency training at the former Greater Omaha Podiatric Residency program. The program included a rotation through the Des Moines University College of Podiatric Medicine and Surgery as resident faculty.

Podiatry Management spoke with Dr. Virbulis recently to learn more about her path to the presidency and her aspirations for the year ahead.

PM: How did you choose podiatry?

Virbulis: I am a product of mentorship. A dear friend of mine



Dr. Virbulis

in pre-med enrolled in podiatry, and I thought he had lost touch with his previous goals. I went to the college student center to learn more about podiatry; they gave me brochures and some names of local DPMs who were involved in career assistance. I contacted three podiatrists to visit,

and they each invited me to shadow them. I watched how attentive they were to their patients' concerns and saw the variety of treatments they offered. From one room to the next, the need was never the same. They really cared, and they gave patients practical tips on how to get better.

They had a meaningful conversation with each patient about their medical needs.

When I matriculated in 1981, I felt podiatry would allow me the freedom of work-life balance, allowing me to be connected to my family, profession, and community—and I feel it as enthusiastically today as when I chose it. I wanted to be able to set my hours; do surgery and office care; take care of the whole gamut of patient types from grandmas to babies to athletes, etc. Podiatry gave me all those options and more.

PM: You have a long history with the VA. How has your role providing care to our nation's veterans impacted your practice of podiatry?

Virbulis: Before anything else, let me express that it is my sincere honor to work for the country's veterans. I have been associated with the VA for 17 years in addition to my private practice. I wanted to challenge the feeling of being so comfortable with the skill set in my private practice, and I knew the VA would do

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that—there are often high-risk patients who come to the clinic with complex issues that can include their feet. The VA has given me the opportunity to be immersed in so many types of care needs. I have had a chance to see military injuries, chem-

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ical injuries, the ramifications of uncontrolled diabetes, and worse. They are each demanding cases that require a breadth of expertise and allow me to use my diagnostic skills fully. Working at the VA has made my practice of podiatric medicine on a daily basis much richer.

PM: *What will be the focus of your presidency?*

Virbulis: Across the landscape of what APMA strives to do, there's so much that needs attention—parity, student recruitment to support the vitality of our podiatric medical schools, community awareness of the value of podiatry, stewardship of our resources balanced against ever-increasing budgetary needs, cultivation of leaders and volunteerism, enfranchising young physicians. I don't believe a single focus is an option now. I'm also very cognizant that moving forward, the programs we start to put together as part of our new Strategic Plan must have what they need to be successful.

PM: *APMA serves a wide spectrum of constituents at a variety of career stages and in many subspecialties. How do you see the association meeting all those needs?*

Virbulis: I believe APMA has value for every member. For our young physicians, for example, we recently launched our Emerging Leaders Program. We also provide an online Young Physician Transition Series with resources broken out by year, we have a research workgroup that is driving more research and data for the profession, and we offer CECH in a variety of formats so that young and seasoned physicians can stay on top of the science of our profession and maintain its culture through networking.

We recently conducted research that helped us better understand what every segment of the membership values. Where we found gaps between what we offer and what the members need to support them in practice, we are building new resources. Our staff is actively working to provide concierge-level member service and to communicate new and existing resources to the members.

As a member, I can say that APMA creates value for me every day. I have benefited from the education APMA provides for me and my patients; from the advocacy APMA conducts to allow me to confidently practice to the extent of my education and training; from the research APMA has supported to advance our profession; and from the community that our association has built. APMA creates sustainability for our profession, protecting podiatric physicians and their interests so that we can provide the best care to our patients.

PM: *APMA has recently revised its Strategic Plan. Tell us how that plan is shaping the work of the Association.*

Virbulis: Yes, the update of the Strategic Plan was a massive effort in 2022. The new plan has four main

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pillars that serve as a foundation for the many tasks and goals APMA has set. APMA will:

- Be the Leading Advocate,
- Offer Preeminent Education,
- Drive Innovative Research, and
- Create an Empowered Community for our profession.

APMA has been an advocate for the profession from its inception. The most obvious advocacy we do is the legislative and regulatory work that continues to be driven by our Legislative Committee and Health Policy and Practice committees, but that is not the only way APMA advocates. Every time there is a publication, every time a message is sent to an insurance payer, every time a staff member or volunteer attends a meeting of another health-care organization, APMA is promoting and advocating for podiatry and its members. I strongly urge every podiatrist to be involved in advocating for the profession, whether that looks like a fundraiser for a state politician; a meet-

“Being a mentor for a prospective student is the first step in building the empowered community our plan envisions.”

ing or call with local, state, or federal representatives to communicate our concerns; or, at minimum, supporting the APMAPAC.

Education comes in many forms. APMA of course provides outstanding continuing education events in person and online. We are also responsible in other ways. We must clearly, enthusiastically, unrelentingly create a drumbeat for our wonderful profession. We look forward to more directly recruiting our future colleagues through the work of our Student Recruitment Task Force. Our extensive research, combined with data collected by students at our colleges, has demonstrated that we must recruit students in both the high school and undergraduate demographics.

APMA continues to support evidence-driven career awareness and student recruitment efforts, and our campaigns have reached more than 20 million prospective students thus far. Our practicing podiatrists are the best advocates for our profession. We know without a shadow of a doubt that when a prospective student has contact with a practicing podiatric physician and surgeon, the odds are strong that they will apply. Consider contacting your local high school or college counselors to offer an opportunity for students to find out what your practice day is like, and, by all means, sign up to be a mentor through our Mentor Network.

Being a mentor for a prospective student is the first step in building the empowered community our plan

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envisions. That community is one that acknowledges and embraces every member of the podiatric profession, celebrating the diversity of background, subspecialty, stage of practice, and practice setting that

of other healthcare professions, and we are actively working to strengthen our relationships with other organizations that support podiatry's goals.

I am excited by the new emphasis that our Strategic Plan places on innovative research. We intend to engage students, residents, and young

ulatory battles, but also will improve understanding among the general public and within the medical community of the value of the care we provide.

PM: What would you ask of your fellow members as you assume the presidency?

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make up the rich tapestry of podiatric medicine and surgery. As we discussed earlier, APMA must demonstrate value to each of those diverse members, and we must all take every opportunity in our small profession to celebrate our differences rather than sow division. Our empowered community also includes members

physicians in the research process. We hope to involve our TDI fellows with their experience and enhance JAPMA and encourage peer reviewers for it. A dynamic Research Work Group has been formed and will collaborate in these endeavors. Our registry is collecting data that not only will help us fight legislative and reg-

Virbulis: I ask my fellow members to follow their passion for excellence in patient care. We're ultimately here for our patients, and I believe that passion is what drives us to stay well-educated, to create relationships with our legislators, to produce research, and to work together within the community of medicine. Look outside yourself and your practice and use your passion and skills to participate in APMA in a positive, productive way. I will be there with you in the fray, working together to unify our wonderful profession and to achieve our mutual goals. **PM**