The Summit That Survived a ‘Blizzard’

By Donna Breckenridge, communications director, ABRF

On the afternoon of Wednesday, March 6, 2013, a small group of people huddled around a table in the board room of a Marriott Hotel in Bethesda, Maryland, working to make a decision. The American Board of Radiology’s (ABR’s) Summit on “Safe and Appropriate Medical Imaging: Partnering for a Patient-Centered Approach” was scheduled to start early the next morning and go through noon on Friday. But, as predicted, a mixture of snow and sleet (the weather report called it a blizzard) was significantly affecting travel across the country and had rolled into the D.C. area late the night before.

Luckily, this group of ABRF board members and staff had made it to the hotel before the bad weather started. But what about everyone else? Eighty-five people were scheduled to attend, most coming in later that day or early the next morning, and flights were being cancelled right and left. Even those who had planned to drive were worried about the road conditions.

As they discussed the situation, everyone looked out the window and watched as the sleet and snow continued to fall. Should they cancel the Summit, or should it go on with whoever was able to get there? In addition to the many attendees flying in, the keynote speaker, Dr. Don Berwick (former administrator of CMS) was trying his best to fly from the Virgin Islands to Boston, and then down to D.C. What if he didn’t make it? Or what if he got there, but there were few people to hear him speak?

Summit participants, as well as staff, had put in many hours of hard work over the past few months to prepare for this important meeting. In addition to the presentations and panels, participants had been divided into three breakout groups to focus on patient engagement, appropriateness, and safety. Facilitators (two for each group), recorders, and scribes had been meeting by conference call and posting their ideas on the Summit Wiki; they were well prepared to lead the groups and assist with the brainstorming and discussions. How would the momentum of this group be sustained if the Summit were to be cancelled? On the other hand, how could people be asked to brave a blizzard, risking life and limb to get there?

For their part, the airlines had a very narrow window of time to make the determination about cancellation of flights vs. leaving their schedules intact. As it turned out, they did make the call, and many of the flights into Washington, DC from major airports around the country were cancelled.

In the end, the Summit organizers made the right decision. Wednesday afternoon, they sent out a message to participants letting them know that the Summit would go on – even if it turned out to be a
small group sitting around the same board table and discussing the issues informally – but to think of their safety first and not to worry about attending if travel proved to be impossible or too risky. Later in the day, the organizers learned that, by some miracle, one facilitator for each breakout group would be able to attend. By late Wednesday night, an abbreviated agenda, beginning with Dr. Berwick’s presentation at 11 a.m. the next day, had been distributed by email.

No one really knew what to expect when they woke up the next morning. Incredibly, the sun was shining, and there was no sign of snow, rain, or ice; evidently, the “blizzard” had fizzled out! (This became an item of national discussion since numerous changes across the country were guided by the national weather reports.) Dr. Berwick arrived early and began to meet with the executive group assembled around 10 a.m., and then he joined the media briefing. Staff members checking people in at the desk watched in amazement as more and more participants filed in, happy to be there and ready to get started. As Dr. Berwick began speaking, hotel staff were summoned to bring in more chairs and tables to accommodate all the attendees, who were still arriving and crowding in to the smaller, downsized room.

After all was said and done, the March 2013 ABRF Summit was a huge success, with 55 individuals attending in person (approximately 65 percent of those registered). Dr. Berwick immediately set the tone with his inspirational speech, telling his audience that radiology is a “charismatic species” within healthcare, and that “if radiology were to change, it would change healthcare forever.”

Among other things, Dr. Berwick challenged his audience not to wait too long; to set clear aims for better care, better health, and lower costs; to establish bold, quantitative targets; to get patients and their families involved; and to be sure to engage young people in the dialogue. He also urged everyone to act as good citizens in a system that is concerned with good care, not payments. Finally, after considering the efforts individuals had made to attend the Summit, Dr. Berwick asked a very pointed question: “Why would a group of people come together to engage in a set of activities that could reduce their own income?” His answer: “Because they’re here for the patients!”

The remainder of the meeting focused on crystallizing the goals of a national alliance to bring safer and more appropriate care to patients. Some of these goals were developing through the breakout groups and their reports back to the larger group, as well as through presentations from those representing many domains within imaging. A number of excellent ideas and projects were enthusiastically proposed and debated, with the groups pledging to keep up the momentum, work toward the next steps, and present reports of their progress at the next Summit.

On Friday, Summit participants left inspired, energized, and even more committed to their vision of a national alliance focused on a medical imaging system that is optimized for patients. The ABRF looks forward to welcoming those who could not make it to the March Summit - as well as those who were able to attend - to the next Summit in Bethesda, on August 22-23. And, hopefully, there will be no blizzards in August!

For more information on the March 2013 Summit, go to www.abrfoundation.org/summit-March2013.