

## Partnering for a Goal

An Interview with the ADA's Dr. William T. Cefalu



William T. Cefalu, M.D., has been chief scientific medical and mission officer (CSMO) at the American Diabetes Association (ADA) since February 2017. He has more than 30 years of work in diabetes research and care, most notably as Professor and Executive Director at Louisiana State University's Pennington Biomedical, where he began work in 2003. Prior to his appointment as CSMO, Cefalu worked with the ADA for nearly 20 years in a variety of roles to advance the organization's mission: prevent and cure diabetes and improve the lives of all people affected by diabetes.

*"The diabetes epidemic is bigger than any one organization. We all have to work together if we want to make any meaningful change."*

*Group Practice Journal* recently asked him about his background, the changing landscape of diabetes care, his vision for where the ADA is headed, and ADA's partnership with AMGA Foundation's Diabetes: Together 2 Goal® national campaign.

**GPJ:** What initially drew you to the study of diabetes?

**Cefalu:** When I was involved in my residency and fellowship training, caring for individuals with diabetes, I realized that there was so much we didn't understand about the condition and that there were very few

therapeutic options to help patients with diabetes manage their disease. All we had at that time were sulfonylureas and insulin. We also noted how patients were suffering from terrible complications such as retinopathy, neuropathy, and heart disease. Thus, there was a lack of information about the disease process, which made it challenging to treat patients. I became very interested in diabetes and realized that it affects every organ system, and I saw that as an opportunity for research.

**GPJ:** The ADA recently released its strategic plan for 2017 and beyond. What is most important for health-care leaders to know?

**Cefalu:** ADA's strategic plan has three pillars: driving discovery of treatment and cure through research, intensifying the conversation about diabetes through advocacy, and supporting people with diabetes and those who treat them. The ADA has essentially realigned such that research, professional services, products, consumer programs, advocacy, etc., are now aligned under our "mission" focus. This allows us, as an association, to work more effectively together to accomplish these three pillars through a cross-functional leveraging of resources. Our new initiatives are not being developed in isolation, but with input and expertise from all areas of the association, staff and volunteers. This new operating model will help us be efficient with this new strategy and, ultimately, successful to reach our goals.

**GPJ:** What are the main challenges healthcare providers face today when treating people with diabetes?

**Cefalu:** There is so much new information that seems to come out each day on treating diabetes and its comorbidities. It's hard to keep up with this pace. There are also issues with translating research into clinical care quickly as we know research findings known today may take years to make it to the clinical setting. So, as a scientific and medical community, we need to use all our technical tools today along with streamlining processes so that research findings can be translated effectively. Another challenge is simply the sheer burden of the disease with so many individuals diagnosed with the condition.

**GPJ:** How is the ADA helping address these challenges?

**Cefalu:** With the diabetes landscape changing so rapidly, we want to provide more immediate information to clinicians. We will be revising the process by which Standards of Medical Care in Diabetes is updated, and plan to have updates available throughout the year based on significant findings that are released and that could impact clinical care. Our standards are already among the few in medicine that are updated every year; now we will be able to respond even more quickly when significant new clinical data emerges. We are hopeful that new technology used by the ADA will help make treatment resources available to a broader audience. On top of all of this, we will continually monitor healthcare provider needs and ensure those needs are met in a timely fashion.

**GPJ:** The ADA was the first partner of our Diabetes: Together 2 Goal® campaign. Why does the ADA partner with this campaign?

**Cefalu:** The diabetes epidemic is bigger than any one organization. We all have to work together if we want to make any meaningful change. Together 2 Goal® is convening associations like ADA and organizations like AMGA members to tackle this epidemic using data-driven methods based on our Standards of Care. It's through partnerships like this where we will be able to make a difference in this disease.

**GPJ:** What excites you personally about Together 2 Goal®?

**Cefalu:** Together 2 Goal® completely aligns with our mission to improve the lives of all people affected by diabetes. This campaign is helping us reach our ultimate goal—a life free from diabetes and all its burdens.

**GPJ:** The ADA is working in collaboration with Together 2 Goal® to hold a diabetes symposium in Indianapolis on September 12-13. How can medical groups and health systems benefit from this event?

**Cefalu:** Attendees will be able to learn about specific diabetes guidelines from ADA experts, as well as hear about best practices from quality improvement leaders in the field. The conversations and smaller-group breakouts will foster a great environment for learning, and all of this information will be able to be shared with partners back at the hospitals and health systems.

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