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Being in the Right Place for the Right Reason *Growth and Vision for Regional Health Care*

By David R. Smith, MD

To understand our plans for the future of SUNY Upstate Medical University, I want to relate a story set in our present.

Recently, in the emergency room at University Hospital, the teaching hospital at SUNY Upstate, a gentleman from Cortland County arrived with his wife. She was suffering stroke symptoms and he brought her our hospital for further evaluation and treatment. Within moments of her arrival she was seen by a clinical team at our NYS Designated Stroke Center, the only one in the region. Her CT scan was quick, thanks to a multi-slice scanner located right in the ER, and she was immediately evaluated for the best treatment, with both pharmacists and neurologists standing by. If further consultation had been needed, other neuroscientists could have instantly viewed her scans on a PC from any location.

Thirty leaders at SUNY Upstate make this team happen, and many of the team's dozens of clinical caregivers—including the stroke coordinator and stroke director—received a formal part of their education here.

For this patient there was a happy outcome. Thanks to her family's quick recognition of her symptoms, the responsiveness of the ambulance crew, and her immediate evaluation at the hospital, she was treated quickly with clot busting drugs (which can only be administered within three hours of symptom onset) and did not need surgery.

So what does this one family's experience, on one late evening, tell you about what SUNY Upstate is, and what it aspires to be? It shows that we are — and hope to further our reach — as a true *regional* Academic Medical Center. In addition to this patient from Cortland County, we are here, as a public trust, for 1.8 million people in 17 counties — that's one-third of the state's land mass. We've educated not only members of our own clinical staff and medical residents, but thousands of area health professionals. At some point, we will all be patients and our goal is to build on existing excellence and create a world-class facility for our region. And while we will continue to draw people to our doors, our vision is to bring our mission directly to more communities. In the near future, for example, we hope that a stroke patient from Cortland County will be able to be treated immediately in his or her local hospital through a telemedicine consultation between the ER doctors and our neurologists.

We hope ideas like this will become our reality. Currently our entire campus is involved in Engaging Excellence—a strategic planning process. We anticipate that the initiatives generated by our own employees to plan our growth, will keep our mission responsive and relevant to the needs of our region.

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SUNY Upstate Education to Address Our Health Care Shortages

Right now, there are more than 40 official health provider shortage areas throughout Central New York—especially in the North Country. SUNY Upstate’s four colleges educate 1,200 students each year, and many graduates stay in Central New York to fill vital jobs. To address health care shortages, we want to see the number of students grow by 20 to 30 percent in the next four years, including those in our Rural Medicine program. In addition, we are adding essential new programs in response to regional needs. We are expecting approval soon for a Nurse Anesthetist degree program, which would be the only one between Buffalo and Albany. Our College of Nursing also plans to enroll RNs in a new surgical first assist program this fall. These nurses, who are given intensive training to work with surgeons, can be a boon in smaller hospitals by freeing up a second physician who would normally be present in the operating room. We are also planning for a Master’s of Public Health in conjunction with Syracuse University, and a Physicians Assistant degree program to be launched from our clinical campus in Binghamton. Our College of Health Professions is also anticipating a DOH grant to provide scholarships to grads who would launch their careers in underserved areas.

In addition to landing great careers — often before they graduate — our students also benefit from the lower State University tuition. However, that is not to say that our education is equally affordable to all. While tuition for undergraduate programs has increased slightly, SUNY medical school tuition has jumped 75% since 2001. Many of our students work, juggle family responsibilities, and enter school with existing undergraduate debt. We need to keep our education accessible to all students of high merit. That is why, for the first time this year, we will be launching a matching-gift program to fund scholarships for Upstate students.

Positive Economic Impact

Using a modest 2.3% multiplier, our annual economic impact as the region’s largest employer is estimated at \$1.77 billion. Our research growth — which is last year was the fastest growing in the SUNY system—contributes significantly to this figure. Research is the third part of our mission, complementing education and patient care, all of which draw bright minds to our region. Our researchers are working on more than 400 investigations, many of which directly relate to the health concerns of our region: vision, diabetes, obesity, cancer, spinal injuries, genetics, just to name a few.

The formal mission of SUNY Upstate is to improve the health of the communities we serve through education, biomedical research, and health care. I put it even more succinctly: We save lives, our graduates save lives and through research, we create hope.

David R. Smith, MD, is the sixth President of SUNY Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, the county’s largest employer. He began his post in September 2006, returning to the Northeast after serving as Chancellor of the Texas Tech University System, President of the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, and Commissioner of the Texas Department of Health. He and his wife, Donna Bacchi, MD, MPH, a pediatrician and public health advisor, have two grown children.