

UT Southwestern Medical Center

New Academic Year

September 8, 2020

To the UT Southwestern Community:

As we begin the 2020-21 academic year, I write to welcome all of you, especially those who are new members of the UT Southwestern community. I also would like to use this occasion, as I have done in previous years, to highlight some of the major events and achievements of FY20 and some of the issues and priorities for the year ahead.

As a community, we continue to face the unprecedented challenge of COVID-19 that dominated the second half of 2019-20, and we are also in the midst of grappling, directly and indirectly, with the other national challenges of economic devastation and racial unrest that currently dominate the news.

Nonetheless, I am pleased to report that UT Southwestern continues to advance, thanks to the unwavering dedication of our faculty and staff to fulfilling our mission of promoting health and a healthy society through education, discovery, and healing. This dedication has been at the core of UT Southwestern for its entire history, but the COVID-19 pandemic has created unparalleled challenges, and I have been awed by the way the UT Southwestern community has risen to the occasion.

For some of you, it has meant continuing to come to campus every day; for others, it has meant adapting to working from home and, for many, doing their jobs while caring for children at home. For all of us, it has meant changing behaviors to keep ourselves, our colleagues, our patients, and our families as safe as possible.

We all owe a special debt of gratitude to our colleagues who have been serving since March as the **Emergency Operations Center (EOC)**, advising the Executive Vice Presidents and me on all institutional issues related to COVID-19. The EOC includes leaders from all sectors of the institution, and it has been led by **Dr. William Daniel**, Vice President and Chief Quality Officer for the UT Southwestern Health System, with **Dr. Bruce Brown**, Associate Vice President for Safety and Business Continuity, as its administrative manager.

Leadership Transitions

Several important leadership transitions occurred last year, with others on the horizon for this year.

Dr. Thomas Wang joined us as Chair of the Department of Internal Medicine in February 2020, having previously served as Director of the Division of Cardiovascular Medicine at Vanderbilt University, and **Dr.**

Elan Louis became Chair of the Department of Neurology in April 2020, coming from Yale University, where he was Chief of the Movement Disorders Division.

Dr. Philipp Scherer began serving as Interim Chair of the Department of Cell Biology in May, following the departure of Dr. Sandra Schmid. As of September 1, **Dr. Julio Pérez Fontán** stepped down as Chair of the Department of Pediatrics to assume the newly established position of Associate Dean for Clinical Faculty Development, and **Dr. Stephen Skapek**, Chief of the Division of Pediatric Hematology and Oncology, is now also serving as Interim Chair of the Department of Pediatrics.

And Dr. W. P. Andrew Lee, Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs, Provost, and Dean of the Medical School, recently announced the appointment of **Dr. Eric Peterson**, an international leader in cardiovascular clinical research, as the inaugural Vice Provost and Senior Associate Dean for Clinical Research and Vice President for Health System Research. Dr. Peterson will be coming from Duke University, and he will be starting at UT Southwestern on November 1.

Within the central administration, following a national search, **Natalie Ramello** joined us last September as the Vice President for Institutional Compliance and Chief Compliance Officer. And after another extensive national search, **Russell Poole** was recently selected to become our new Chief Information Officer (CIO). He will start on October 1, coming from Denver, where he has been the Associate Vice Chancellor for the Office of Information Technology and the CIO for the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus.

Faculty Recognition

We can all be proud of UT Southwestern faculty who received special recognition for their achievements and contributions.

Dr. Joseph Takahashi, Professor and Chair of the Department of Neuroscience, received the Gruber Neuroscience Prize in October 2019 for his pioneering work in circadian rhythms. **Dr. Vincent Tagliabracci**, an Assistant Professor of Molecular Biology, received the 2020 Norman Hackerman Award in Chemical Research, an annual award presented by the Welch Foundation. And the Wiley Prize in Biomedical Sciences was awarded to **Dr. Michael Rosen**, Professor and Chair of Biophysics, along with two others, for their pioneering studies in cell biology.

In an unprecedented year for UT Southwestern, in April four faculty were elected to the National Academy of Sciences: **Dr. Sean Morrison**, Director of the Children's Medical Center Research Institute at UT Southwestern, Professor of Pediatrics, and a Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) Investigator; **Dr. Kim Orth**, Professor of Molecular Biology and Biochemistry and an HHMI Investigator; **Dr. Michael Rosen**, Professor and Chair of Biophysics and an HHMI Investigator; and **Dr. Sandra Schmid**, who was then at UTSW as a Professor and Chair of Cell Biology (and who left in May to become the Chief Scientific Officer of the Chan Zuckerberg Biohub, but remains an adjunct member of our faculty).

The **Leaders in Clinical Excellence Awards** were established in 2018 to recognize exceptional contributions of faculty in our clinical departments, and the teams they work with, to the care of patients, the education of the next generation of health care professionals, and to UT Southwestern overall. A list of the awards, which include The Patricia and William L. Watson Jr., M.D. Award for

Excellence in Clinical Medicine, and those who received them last year, is available on the [Leaders in Clinical Excellence website](#).

Two UT Southwestern faculty – **Dr. Reeni Abraham**, Associate Professor of Internal Medicine, and **Dr. Julie Champine**, Professor of Radiology – were among the recipients of the Regents’ Outstanding Teaching Award, the UT System’s highest educational honor, which recognizes outstanding teaching, mentoring, and personal commitment to students and the learning process.

Education

In early March, when UT Southwestern instituted remote learning and social distancing in response to COVID-19, our students and faculty showed impressive resilience and adaptability in figuring out ways for students to complete graduation requirements. In addition, many of our students have volunteered to help in numerous ways that ranged from screening visitors to clinical buildings to staffing offices as backups for employees who could not come to campus, as well as providing child care for front line workers whose children were at home because schools had closed.

Our graduating class of 2020 had the unprecedented experience of a **virtual “Match Day”** and then a **virtual Commencement**, before moving on to residency training in their journey to become fully trained physicians. Our School of Health Professions has launched a doctoral program in **Applied Clinical Research**, while our Graduate School is initiating a new doctoral degree in **Computational Biology**.

Research

Even with the slowdown caused by closing labs in March and then reopening them in May to 25% occupancy and then to 50% in June, UT Southwestern research faculty have been highly productive, making many important advances. Discoveries have ranged from **Dr. Trish Perl’s** (pre-COVID) findings that surgical masks were as effective as N95 respirator masks in protecting health care workers from the flu and other respiratory viruses; to **Dr. Lora Hooper’s** identification of a molecule linking weight gain to gut bacteria; to **Dr. Sean Morrison’s** discovery of the metabolic feature that allows melanoma cells to spread; to **Dr. John Schoggins** and his international team finding a human protein that potentially inhibits the coronavirus; to **Dr. Madhukar Trivedi’s** development of screening and treatment tools that can be used by primary care physicians to diagnose and treat depression.

The challenges posed by COVID-19 also have galvanized new research directions on the campus, with **more than 200 COVID-related research projects** currently in progress, and UTSW faculty have already contributed 155 peer-reviewed publications on COVID. For information about these projects, funding opportunities, and institutional resources, such as the UTSW SARS-CoV2 Biorepository and the UTSW COVID-19 Patient Registry, please see the [research section of the UTSW COVID-19 website](#).

Patient Care

This has been an extraordinary year for UT Southwestern physicians, nurses and other members of our health care teams, who have been on the front lines of testing and treating COVID-19 patients and adapting to new operational realities as the situation with the pandemic has evolved, whether at Clements University Hospital or our partners, Parkland, Children’s Medical Center, and the Dallas VA.

For the fourth year in a row, UT Southwestern's **William P. Clements Jr. University Hospital** was **designated by U.S. News & World Report as the #1 Best Hospital in Dallas-Fort Worth and the #2 Best Hospital in Texas**. In addition, UTSW was ranked among the top 50 hospitals nationally (from among nearly 5,000) in 10 specialties, and among the top 25 in six of the specialties. See [UT Southwestern's news release](#) for a list of the 10 specialties. As one indication of the quality of care that led to these rankings, a **focus on improving mortality** has led to hundreds of lives being saved.

Last October, we formalized a new working relationship with our partner Children's Health by establishing a **joint pediatric enterprise (JPE)** to advance our shared commitment to the needs of pediatric patients and their families. This joint governance will facilitate alignment and coordination of our collective pediatric facilities and programs, and **Dr. Dai Chung**, who has served as Chief of the Division of Pediatric Surgery, has been appointed as the Chief Medical Officer of the JPE.

Dr. John Warner, Executive Vice President for Health System Affairs, led a **comprehensive strategic planning process** for our University Health System that included six workgroups and over 100 faculty and staff. The recommendations, which are now being finalized, will provide an important road map for UT Southwestern in the coming years for fulfilling our commitment to provide the very best care possible for those who come to us for help.

Implementation of one of the priorities identified in the planning process – the **development of telehealth capabilities** to serve the needs of our patients – has already been galvanized by the impact of the pandemic. Virtually nonexistent at the beginning of March, the capacity was created with remarkable speed as a safe way of delivering clinical care during the pandemic. Although the Health System is again fully operational, we are averaging 1,500 virtual visits per day, as this new model has been embraced by our patients and clinicians.

Finally, **Southwestern Health Resources (SWHR)**, the clinically integrated network formed by UT Southwestern and Texas Health Resources four years ago to provide coordinated care to the broad communities of North Texas, has distinguished itself in providing high value care. As the fourth largest Accountable Care Network in the country, SWHR was the #1 ranked in health care expense savings, while being among the highest ranked in the quality of care delivered.

Facilities

Although the strength of UT Southwestern is ultimately based on the quality of the work that goes on inside our buildings, we have continued momentum, even during COVID-19, in developing the facilities to accommodate our growing research and clinical programs on the campus and beyond.

Late last fall, we completed and opened a new **UT Southwestern/Texas Health Resources campus in Frisco**, composed of a UTSW Medical Office Building and a THR 73-bed hospital; and we will be completing the **third tower expansion of Clements University Hospital** this fall, which will become the clinical home for inpatient neuroscience programs associated with the Peter O'Donnell Jr. Brain Institute.

Other major construction projects include the **Radiation Oncology expansion building**, which will be ready for patient use in July 2021, and the combined **O'Donnell Brain Institute/Simmons Cancer Center twin buildings** on North Campus, which are scheduled to open in June/September 2022. In addition, the new Vivarium on South Campus is nearing completion and will begin operations this fall.

Construction will begin this fall on a UT Southwestern **outpatient facility in South Dallas**, as part of the Red Bird Mall development project. Children's Health will be participating in this project with us, and we are both very pleased to be expanding treatment options for adults and children in this underserved area.

We are also in the early planning stages for a new academic building that will be the base for setting up a robust program in **Biomedical Engineering**. This joint UTSW/UTD project will be located on East Campus, next to the BioCenter.

COVID-19

To keep UT Southwestern students, faculty, staff, patients, and visitors as protected and safe as possible, we instituted a series of significant operational changes in March, and subsequently developed a four-stage plan for guiding us through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Phase 1 was based on having the campus open to only essential personnel; we moved to Phase 2 on May 11, 2020, which allowed for limited occupancy of campus laboratories and offices, the resumption of standard services and elective/non-urgent surgeries in our Health System, and required strict observance of the non-pharmacological interventions (NPI) of safe distancing, masking, and hand hygiene. **We will be in Phase 2 at least until January**, but will move back to Phase 1 if COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations surge to the extent that it becomes necessary to do this.

Hopefully, we will be able to move to Phase 3 of full occupancy with NPI and limited distancing restrictions in January, but it will completely depend on whether we can meet the metrics we have established for moving from phase to phase. Phase 4 will be our "new normal" once the virus is under control, and we have made the necessary progress in being able to treat and prevent it.

A full description of our plans for Phase 1 and for a restoration of operations in Phases 2, 3, and 4 can be found on the [COVID-19 website](#).

I also want to note the essential – but often unrecognized – role played by our **colleagues in Business Affairs**, under the leadership of Arnim Dontes, Executive Vice President for Business Affairs, in supporting so effectively all the changes in campus operations during Phase 1 and Phase 2, as well as the ongoing activities of employees who have been working remotely since March.

And recognizing that the compelling need for social distancing has heightened the importance of communication, I want to thank our **colleagues in Communications, Marketing, and Public Affairs**, who have worked tirelessly these past six months, under the leadership of Dr. Marc Nivet, Executive Vice President for Institutional Advancement, to keep the entire institution up to date through daily emails from the EOC and the dynamic COVID-19 website.

Looking Ahead

Looking to the year ahead, we look forward to the possibility of a COVID-19 vaccine becoming available and allowing us to get to our "new normal" by this time next year.

We are proud that, despite reduced operations during FY20, we were able to get through the year without any employee layoffs or furloughs related to COVID-19. However, this commitment to our employees meant that for the first time in my 12 years as President, we ended the year with a budget deficit – and we were not able to offer any salary increases for FY21, despite the hard work and accomplishments of so many UTSW employees under especially challenging circumstances. A high priority for FY21 is getting the institution back on track financially, so that we can move forward with our strategic priorities and be in a position to reinstate a merit program for FY22.

A key activity for this year is that the **State of Texas 87th Legislative Session**, which will allocate our state funding for the next two years, will begin in January 2021. As everyone recognizes, it will be an especially challenging session because of the impact of COVID-19 on the state's economy, but we have begun preparing for it through interactions with individual legislators, to make sure they are aware of UT Southwestern's needs and contributions to Texas.

In this new year, we will once again undertake our rolling **Six Year Strategic Planning Process** to prioritize our needs and suggest where we should be using our resources. In addition to this institutional planning process, strategic priorities for FY21 include finalizing and advancing the implementation of the clinical strategic plan, as well as the joint pediatric enterprise, and initiatives under the Peter O'Donnell Jr. Brain Institute. We also will be recruiting an inaugural chair for our new Department of Biomedical Engineering that was approved last year.

As in every other year, **recruitment of new leaders** for a number of our academic departments and centers will be a key activity; several searches are currently in progress (Cell Biology, Neurosurgery, and Biomedical Engineering), and others, including Pediatrics and Ophthalmology, are expected to be launched in the coming months.

As another institutional priority, we will be looking to sustain and enhance **employee engagement**, which is essential to our ongoing success. We were pleased by the progress made in FY20, as evidenced by our improved scores on the Values in Practice Employee Engagement Survey completed in June 2020, and we will be monitoring the implementation of departmental and institutional action plans to address issues and enhance areas of progress identified by the survey results. Ultimately, we are seeking to achieve a high performance workplace culture through innovative workforce initiatives and enhanced employee feedback and communication.

Concluding Comments

We are all living through a generation-defining experience of not just COVID-19, but also of the widespread and sustained civic engagement that was triggered by the killing of George Floyd and many others. In the end, we will be defined not only by these crises, but by how we have responded to them. I have been personally sustained – and I hope each of you has been as well – by the commitment to our mission that has continued to guide us, and by the compassion and caring for one another that have also come to stand out as defining characteristics of our campus community.

UT Southwestern is unequivocally committed to promoting diversity, providing equal opportunity, and prohibiting racial discrimination – and to sustaining a safe and secure environment for learning and working for all students, trainees, faculty, and staff. Racial bias and sexual discrimination or misconduct will not be tolerated, and all members of the campus community are expected to treat one another with dignity and respect.

This commitment has led to critical conversations across campus in recent months to better understand all facets of racism and bias and where they may unintentionally exist on our campus. Additionally, as part of our Six Year Strategic Planning Process, I will be creating a new committee to focus exclusively on **Diversity, Inclusion, Equity, and Community Engagement**. This committee will be charged with identifying barriers that limit opportunity for any historically underrepresented groups on campus and proposing actions to proactively ensure that marginalized groups thrive at UTSW.

I thank you again for your resilience and commitment, and I look forward to communicating with you on a regular basis through the biweekly briefings on COVID-19 and other campus matters that I will begin next week. I am confident that, because of the talents and dedication of our faculty and staff, this will be another year of accomplishments we can be proud of as an institutional community.

Daniel K. Podolsky, M.D.
President, UT Southwestern Medical Center