

St. Joseph leadership looking to hospital's future, not past

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Nearly six months have passed since the University of Maryland Medical System (UMMS) assumed ownership of St. Joseph Medical Center in Towson from the Denver-based Catholic Health Initiatives. Now University of Maryland St. Joseph Medical Center and the 12th hospital to join the UMMS system, St. Joseph is working to overcome financial and public relations challenges, some stemming from allegations that its once-renowned cardiologist Dr. Mark Midei performed unnecessary stent procedures for his financial gain.

The Catholic Review sat down May 8 with two of its new leaders, Dr. Mohan Suntha, president and CEO, and Francis X. Kelly, board chairman and former state senator who helped to establish UMMS in the 1980s. The hospital looks forward to celebrating its 150th anniversary next year, which, for Suntha, puts this transition into a historical context. "This is a novel, not a short story," he said of St. Joseph's history. "This is just writing the latest chapter."

The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

CR: How does St. Joseph fit with the UMMS system?

FK: Right now it's a liability to the system because it's been losing money. It's an asset to the system because of its Catholic values. It's an asset to the system because of the quality of the people who work here, who stayed out the storm. (It's an asset because of) its history, its recognition in the community in the past. We just have to all bring that back.

MS: The system has a tradition of respecting the local cultures of the hospitals that have joined the system. Recognizing the value of the Catholic identity; the strength of the relationship between the Catholic Church, this community and this hospital; and pursuing that in partnership with the Archbishop of Baltimore and the archdiocese is a model that will allow the institution to move forward.

CR: St. Joseph is the only Catholic hospital in UMMS. When people think of a Catholic hospital, they sometimes think about the services that Catholic hospitals don't provide, like abortions.

MS: That's really myopic. I understand it, but there is no question that we're

following the Ethical and Religious Directives (for Catholic Health Care Services) of the bishops' conference in terms of the way care is being provided here. That being said, it does this institution a disservice to simply focus on what might not be done here. What should be focused on is that global health care experience that patients get as a consequence of this being a Catholic hospital.

CR: Malpractice allegations against Dr. Midei still hang over the hospital's reputation. What role does that situation have in your financial challenge, and what are you doing to overcome it?

MS: Part of the brand value of the University of Maryland Medical System is that focus on quality, peer review and oversight. Make no mistake, the financial circumstance of this hospital today is far more than what has happened in cardiology. During the last five years, providers who have had the choice have chosen to leave the institution. There are, thankfully, a core group of people who have been very committed to this community. We want to be sure that this community knows that this hospital will be here for a long time, and will be here to serve their needs.

CR: The May 2 news that nearly 250 patient lawsuits were settled in Dr. Midei's malpractice case continues to bring these issues to the forefront.

FK: We're not involved with that (the lawsuits). We purchased the assets. We have nothing to do with the liabilities. We're not being sued.

CR: Are the recent settlements a sign that St. Joseph is moving forward?

MS: Yes. We can't change the past. These settlements, as they come around, are going to raise up an old issue. All we can do is continue to message about the future of this institution by bringing high-quality providers, by realigning with the community. Our best ambassadors are our patients.

CR: How do you summarize your vision going forward?

FK: The experts are telling us it will take five years to turn it around. I believe we can do it in three.

MS: (Sen. Kelly) said this morning that it's his expectation that we at St. Joe's will be viewed as the jewel of the medical system at some point in the future. That summarizes our hope and expectation. It's my hope that we're also known as the most physician-friendly hospital in the region, and that the patients continue to have that unique patient care experience when they walk through our door.

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